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# KUNAPIPI

VOLUME III NUMBER 1  
1981

Kunapipi



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1981

*Kunapipi* is a continuation of *Commonwealth Newsletter* and is published twice a year, Summer and Winter, by Dangaroo Press, Department of English, University of Aarhus. It is a journal of creative and critical writing concerned with the new literatures written in English. The major concentration is on the present and former Commonwealth countries but this is in no way exclusive. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

All correspondence — manuscripts, books for review, inquiries — should be sent to:

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WE REGRET THE LATE APPEARANCE  
OF THE SUMMER ISSUE OF KUNAPIPI.  
THIS IS DUE TO A 10 WEEK  
NATIONWIDE PRINTERS' STRIKE IN  
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APPEAR IN DECEMBER.

# Kunapipi

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VOLUME III NUMBER 1

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*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.

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# KUNAPIPI

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## Why I Write in English

This question is often put to me in England because people see that I am an Indian and are told that I write in English. But it shows a complete ignorance, not unnatural in these days, of the place that the English language holds in India. Any Indian who has had an urge for literary expression during the last hundred years would have written as naturally in English as he would have done in his own mother tongue, and he would not have been conscious that he was making a deliberate choice.

This linguistic situation was the product of history, that is, of British rule in India. To speak of Bengal alone where I was born and brought up, since the sixties of the last century only English was used for the discussion of politics and public questions; it was also employed almost wholly in private correspondence even between sons and fathers; and in social life among men nearly half the conversation would be in English. In the administration of law, lawyers even in the lowest courts in small towns, addressing Bengali magistrates and judges would plead only in English.

English equally dominated our educational system. When I was at school in a small town of East Bengal, eighteen miles from the nearest railway station, and living in huts which had mud floors, walls of mat, and roofs of thatch or corrugated iron, I had the three following books as texts in English in 1908: Kipling's *Jungle Book*, Andrew Lang's *Animal Story Book*, and Palgrave's *Children's Treasury of English Lyrics*. From the age of ten, as I was in 1908, and in any case from the age of twelve we were not allowed to speak to our Bengali teachers in the class except in English. Bengali was permitted only in the Bengali and Sanskrit classes, but when I reached the university stage even Bengali and Sanskrit were taught in English. In our educational system our mother tongue was called 'the second language' or 'the vernacular'.

As a result, all our highest literary enjoyment was in English, not only through English literature, but also in translations of French and other literatures into English. I read Hugo's *Les Misérables* at the age of

fifteen, and Tolstoy the next year. I need not mention my reading of English literature. Of course, all this knowledge of English and absorption in the language was confined to a tiny minority. But in public and cultural life it was this minority which mattered.

So I might say that it would have been a matter of surprise if, having a sense of literary vocation, I did not write in English. In this field, however, a separation of functions had taken place even from the earliest days of modern Bengali literary effort. If a Bengali wanted to go in for what is known as 'creative writing', that is, for poetry or fiction, he generally wrote in Bengali. But in regard to other genres he would write only in English.

As for myself, the case was different. Although I did write some stories, I wrote them both in English and in Bengali. But I gave up fiction and never published anything in that line. What was more exceptional, I wrote both in English and Bengali on politics, cultural subjects, and history. My first pieces, one of literary criticism and the other on cultural history, were, however, written in English and published in English periodicals. That was in 1925 and 1926. I did not begin to write regularly in Bengali till two years later, but from 1927 to 1937 I wrote in both the languages.

In this I am an exception. No Indian writer divides his major literary effort between two languages. I have done that, and have been bilingual. This, however, calls for a severe discipline, because a writer who does this has to forget that he knows the other language when he is writing in one. This is made necessary, and almost obligatory, by the fact that English and Bengali stand in utterly different worlds, not only as languages, but as embodiments of the mind. They have to embody different thoughts and feelings. So, when addressing a literary conference in Delhi I said that when I write in English I am not an *Indian* writer, but a writer in *India*.

But I gave up writing in Bengali in 1937, and did not resume till thirty years later, i.e. in 1967. That was due, first, to the conviction that Bengali culture had reached a dead end, and there was no sense in getting into a blind alley. I wished to address all India, and beyond that the whole of the English-speaking world, and I knew that so far as anybody in India, including Bengal, was interested in my ideas he would read me in English. So by confining myself to English I did not lose any part of my readership.

I reverted to Bengali in 1967, at the age of seventy, because I began to feel that I had something to say to fellow-Bengalis on their past history

and present predicament which would gain greater force if I put that in Bengali. But I would make it clear that what can be written in English cannot be written in Bengali, and what can be written in Bengali cannot be put into English. The two mediums are as different as a piano and an orchestra are in music. English has greater range, colour, and depth, but Bengali can be equally subtle if not as massive or strong. But my life as lived — I have now lived for nearly forty years outside Bengal — has naturally had an effect on my literary output. I have at this moment ten books to my credit, and nine of them are in English. This ratio has, however, no relationship with my loyalty to both the languages. I do not consider English to be a foreign language; on the other hand, I have not become an expatriate in language by not writing in Bengali.

MIHIR SINHA

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## The Quest

Though her younger days were spent in the squalid neighbourhood of Chetla, almost ever since she had had thoughts of her own, she had always dreamed of Ballygunge, the mecca of the middle class. Of Ballygunge and of romance. Of romance and of love. Just beyond those few crossings. Kalighat, Rashbehari, the Lake Market, and then as one left behind the green expanse of the Deshapriya Park, one would be right in the middle of that dream land. Here, in the late afternoons or early evenings, the girls somewhat older than herself did not lean out over the parapets of roof-top terraces, arching their necks or coyly caressing their hair tied into taut plaits or buns. Nor did they loaf about in the streets in bands of girls like the girls of Bhawanipar, as reported by Aunt Bhami. The girls here would rather unhesitatingly stroll along the thoroughfares quite in step with the boys.

From year to year, through the eddies of time as it rolled by, as she grew in size like a bouncing trout, she dragged along with her her younger sister Uma by her hand on such strange forays. Raking about

with her pitiless Jaguar eyes, she saw how the girls of Ballygunge rested their elbows on the shoulders of their male companions, rummaged in the pockets of the boys' shirts and trousers, shared with them their precarious perches on the park railings, dangled those dust encrusted feet with enamelled toes, assumed a too easy familiarity of speech with them, roughhoused with them — slapping them and boxing their ears, and so, unselfconsciously, built up a magic world of excruciating vulgarity. And after that, to proceed a little further down the streets towards the Dhakuria Lakes felt like air-conditioned exhilaration with the very first sip of a drink following a spell of sweltering heat. Heady fragrance of flowers from above one's head — rows of trees stretched on both sides. The street lights stood still, afraid of breaking the pleasant stupor. Rude naked bulbs of light burned only in the kitchens. Otherwise, the houses had soft subdued lighting like cinema houses. The curtains too resembled those in the cinema houses. In fact, the music exactly like film music that she had heard coming from inside a couple of houses was confirmed to be really that of a piano. She wondered, was it quite proper that pianos and stereos and things should so brazenly thrum and bellow in the houses of gentlefolk? On a few evenings she prowled close to the edges of the Lakes and the Vivekananda Park and discovered with what effortless ease those same mannish girls could copy the coquetry of film actresses. In the tantalizing light and shade, their movements, their twitters and giggles were altogether so different.

Ah! The enchanted darkness! In the vaguely malodorous breeze blowing in across the lake, the darkness dimpled. When the breeze blew stronger, the darkness broke into fragments. But how could that satisfy one's desire? Cheated of some untasted bliss, she was on fire with the intensity of her desire. That was not quenched even by pointlessly ill-treating the little sister. She would go back home and spend an interminable hour in the dark cool privacy of the tin-roofed shed serving as the bath room. But that too did not fully smother it. How could the faces of all those girls, the fair skinned and the dusky alike, wear such a glossy look? In which shop did they buy perfumes so subtle, yet so full of body? And at what price? In which school had they learned to talk in two such alternative voices? The game that they played behind the high heavy hangings or the dallying under the shade of trees was after all an old game, but what was the new thing that they did? Would she never catch a glimpse of it herself? Was that unknown new element called love? Was it for the sake of love that one felt to be on fire?

Well, Providence does not usually deprive people of what they really want though His temporal agents pour some brine into it while delivering the divine boon. Who knows, that too may very well be His pleasure. Anyway, at that juncture, the Lord of the little world of the nubile Roma was her father Aghore. Except for him, his family was made up of the two motherless growing daughters. The dark, affectionate, hefty man did not much care for education or culture. His job was to extract the last cent from his shopkeeping. But he easily got the point that the daughter had now to be married off. In his own way, he also assessed exactly what kind of a groom was required. The professional match-maker soon brought in a proposal. Roma with her plump body gleefully swam through the rounds of shopping, the old old jokes and banterings of the neighbours and relatives, and the gradually more and more obtrusive preparations and the various rituals.

In our society, the colour of the skin rather than one's features and figure would bolster up the ego more firmly. Her complexion was nothing but dusky. Her features, though lacking the inner glow of intelligence, were not unattractive under a careful scrutiny. But she had little grace, thanks to overweight and indiscriminate use of cosmetics. In fact, besides the obsession with Ballygunge and all that it meant to her, her only preoccupations were eating and sleeping. And her plan was that once she had left the motherless household, she would tumble down for a cat nap whenever her fancy went that way, in the lulling company of film magazines and film songs crooned over the radio. At the same time, she acutely felt that her youth was full to the brim. Just let her Prince Charming make his appearance, and let the magic of love touch her, and she would grow serene and tranquil. If the Prince had to be engaged in work or studies or anything else, let him. She had no desire for any kind of labour. One felt so near to ecstasy if one could lose oneself in the songs sung in a film, but she had never thought about the fact that it took disciplined effort to learn to sing. Her simple soul had steadfastly been aiming at raising a corner of that curtain of love and slipping inside, securing some nook for herself.

The match-maker pointed out that the groom came of excellent stock. He was healthy, with good habits, an assistant steward in a well known restaurant, making more in tips than in salary. Though not very educated himself, his elder brother had done much by way of higher studies and, settling down abroad, had married a regular European lady there; the groom was under the mature guardianship of his parents, living in their own three-storied house at Ballygunge, the lower floors

being rented out. In his shopkeeper's wisdom, Aghore too made certain discreet enquiries, and although all the information he got was not unmixed good, he found that the basic facts supplied by the match-maker were not false on any count. He commented, 'Of course, Satu as a match-maker never tries to cheat.'

Living in their own house at Ballygunge! Rather running to fat, mild mannered, pleasant featured, at the first sight of him, Roma accepted him with her whole heart. In any case she would never have said no unless he were too ugly looking or a cripple — after all, he held in his hand the key to Ballygunge. Moreover, he was but a little more fair complexioned, somewhat better featured than Roma. His occupation? She had seen from the outside the bars and restaurants on the Chowringhee and in Park Street, had caught glimpses of the interiors through the doors, had also noticed the arrivals and departures of people by taxis and cars. Unlike the romance of Ballygunge, she had not identified herself with those places, yet the aroma of imported wines and exotic perfumes clinging to the atmosphere there did hold an attraction for her, like some enticing sinfulness, though it also brought on a faint sense of nausea. Such luxuriously dim lights reigned there. Again she wondered, why did one have that delicious pang of lonesome yearning if it was not that the matter-of-fact lights in ordinary households were strangled and half dead? But Roma could never ponder for long over such complex questions. Besides, she was after all the daughter of a shopkeeper. She understood that only the rich had any access to Park Street. Let her Prince Charming have his connections there. Let him trail the traces of that night spot for the wealthy — like the wispy weeds hanging from the bulk of an old carp. Roma simply wanted to shut her eyes and dive deep into the waking dreams of her imminent good luck. Around the mat on which she lay, gusty winds from across the narrow stagnant branch of the river, smelling of mud, poured over the low parapet of the terrace and played a rowdy game in the gathering gloom.

However, the relations between darkness and the ceremonies of a Bengalee hindu marriage would be about as cordial as that between a snake and a mongoose. Even in that much avoided corner in the backyard reserved for the stinking pile of household refuse and junk, a bare electric bulb would suddenly smirk, showing its white teeth. In the unpaved piece of the yard in front which had so long been clinging to the scanty shade under the flowering *shendu*, very much like a poor widow pathetically shrinking out of society's eyes — a naked light would expose the ungainly slab of stone on which coal was pieced or the heap of

cowdung waiting to be mixed with coaldust to make briquettes, in the obscene glee of Duhshashan who had publicly disrobed Draupadi in the epic of *Mahabharata*. The lights in the bridal chamber would in the nature of things be shameless, but the privacy of the nooks and corners on the terrace above, that refuge of ultimate privacy, would be equally violated. Traditionally turned into the improvised reception-cum-banquet hall, the terrace, ordinarily the private domain of the women folk, would become as public as the tawdry tent of any cheap circus on a rural circuit, in its temporary dressing of tarpaulin, thin cotton carpets, shabby red hangings, and above all with its clumsy festoon of light. However, like many brides to be, Roma too easily accepted all these excesses: all she needed was to pass this junction, almost like that awesome ferry at *Baitarani* where souls were supposed to cross over to the after-world. For, waiting on the far side were the thrills and ecstasy of love, the indulgences of love, the bottomless pit of love. She crossed the *Baitarani* of her marriage, deep under the anaesthesia of her dreamings of love and Ballygunge.

In the past, we were accustomed to dismiss it as superstition, but these days we know it to be a fact that the pace of time is not universally uniform; one single night in heaven will span one entire year on earth. In fact, the clammy intoxication that gets hold of one on the night of the wedding ceremony, with its sweat and silk brocades, the ornaments of gold and flowers, the smoke from the sacred fire and the incantation of religious verses, the sickly scent of the essences of flowers and the indecencies licensed by the occasion — by the time one gets over it, one is chock-full of experiences. Just as on a journey by river boat, one may wake up after a long sleep in the little cabin made of split bamboos and may come out on the open deck to realize with amazement that the land on either shore wears an unfamiliar look, that one has travelled a long way under the cover of the drowsy night. When Roma got back her bearings, she found the innocent, overfed daughter, looking like a buffalo calf, to be already some ten years old. The spherical son, a fair skinned replica of her mother-in-law, quite before he had completed his fourth year, was dancing around like the Lord of Destruction Himself, beating up people, breaking things, and using un-childlike language like 'I shall bash your head in', 'You son of a bitch', etc. Roma's mother-in-law, the second wife of the lately deceased father-in-law, had suddenly let go her grip of things, after a long unchallenged reign. Roma was now the absolute mistress of the household. Yet, on crossing thirty, she reeled under the



unexpected shock of stumbling upon the yawning chasm of an immense vacuum. Innumerable Bengalee matrons suffer from a trauma like this, soon after the euphoria of marriage wears thin.

Now there was no novelty in the routine pleasures of the human body, nor in the sham attractions of socialising. No more was there the coddling that had been one's due when carrying one's first child, nor one's existence as the centre of all attention in the nursing home, nor the back-breaking tyranny of the regime of feeding bottles and gripe mixtures. In these times there would not even be the residual obligations of having to wait upon the aged in-laws. There would be only three things in one's world — oneself, the Prince Charming, and the time on one's hand. There was so much leisure that she was quite drunk with it for a while. The male cook, the two full-time servants, male and female, the charwoman, the part-time gardener — the entire establishment and style of her late father-in-law she had kept intact, though that was not exactly within the means of her husband. For, otherwise, her precious leisure might get eroded. To do the daily marketing and to dress the vegetables for cooking — an elaborate function in itself — were her mother-in-law's responsibility. Her leisure was absolute. But where was that long awaited thrill, that electric touch of the object of her quest?

Roma, restless with her yearning, was a great favourite of the hawkers and pedlars. Did it quench a little that particular thirst of hers if she swallowed a number of large ice cones in quick succession? Or by eating a large number of puffed balls of pasted pulses filled with sour and chilly-hot gravy that set her palate on fire? Or by hurriedly downing a tall glass of sugar cane juice? She recklessly bought pots and pans from pedlar women, saris from hawkers of handloom sari, joss sticks without caring for quality and indiscriminately lighting them, flung down her overfed body upon the too soft bed, while some programme or other in Bengali or Hindi subliminally crooned or murmured over the radio, and she would vaguely come to the conclusion that she had been cheated out of something unknown but precious. If this particular state of mind could somehow be made to linger for a while, one or two drops of tears might sneak out of her eyes, and through the rest of the day her voice resonated with a sad hollowness. That voice of hers might sound unmusically plaintive to casual listeners, or on such occasions her massive countenance might carry the crude impression of grumpiness to many, but the fire raged less in her heart. However, on those days, when defeating all her efforts, those cursed eyes of hers would in no way get wet, the rage consumed her vitals with redoubled fury.

Inflamed with her own passion, she made the life of everybody within her reach hellish with the ascending scale of the violence of her language, with the blaze of her fury. She would actually roll her eyes, stamp her feet. Peace-loving Sushanto had since the death of his father become accustomed to drinking openly — for pleasure. At this excessive lack of domestic peace, he started to drink heavily, for, without drinking, he could not lose his usual mildness of manners. By and by, on holidays and whenever threatened with the intimate company of his dearest, he got used to fortifying himself with a few quick ones. The neighbours too learned to take as a matter of course the almost regular recurrence of their noisy domestic troubles. Only, neither the members of her family nor the outsiders guessed that there was a secret tender spot in her heart where an old fish hook lodged, tugging at it, ever since her adolescence.

Her sister Uma suffered from no such handicap. Her husband was rather teddy-boyish. He only had to allow Uma a ride on his motorbike to let her taste heavenly bliss. Their five-year old offspring persistently pronounced 'v' in place of 'sh', a typical characteristic of the cockney of Calcutta, but that did not cause the least headache to Uma or her husband. Uma just had no thought in her head, so had no worry either. Whatever the others did in each hour of the day and the night, they too did the same at that hour. And they went to see a film or a stage show every weekend. They merely swam with the traditional currents of life as lived in the northern and older districts of the city. In a life of simple biology, uncomplicated as it is with the agonies and ecstasies of love, pleasures are aplenty as long as one's youth lasts. Perhaps it was through an echo in the dark chemistry of kinship that she felt in her own way the odd vacuum plaguing her elder sister. She was naturally frightened of any kind of vacuum. As a child shuts her eyes and switches off the light at bed time, she frantically looked for a way to fill the ugly vacuum and proposed that the four of them together might go to the theatre, sit on the bank of the river in a cosy evening, or even meet for an occasional drinking party. Exercising her conventional liberty as the sister-in-law, she went to the extent of making a somewhat drunken Sushanto do supposed physical exercises for reducing his girth. The heaviness of the weather was dissipated a little by such gusts of fun and frolic. But that too proved to be too short lived. The charm of newness wore thin. That hussy was of course her own sister, but was she not now too big to pull such shameless pranks! And that overgrown child of a man, Sushanto, — did he take himself for a young beau like Uma's husband? Really, how punctiliously would that fellow bring home boxfuls of food from his

office! — Yes, she had started referring to her husband's place of work as his 'office'.

Again the flames of that fire inside her were kindled. The heroes and heroines of the stage could on occasions melt her into tears. And it was in the lure of that that she went and sat once every week on those shabby plush seats marked with the perspirations of generations of theatre goers, in that half light, overburdened with an oppressive medley of scents and perfumes. But that too failed to do the trick. She was eating her heart out. Everybody was knowingly or unknowingly deceiving her, denying her the access to the supreme secret. Of what use was it to devour the titillating details served up in the film magazines? The summer of her life, her hour of truth was slipping by.

That young woman who lived in the house at the top of the street acted in films. It was anybody's guess what funs and what thrills she enjoyed, and made how much money into the bargain. Roma had heard that the woman kept her money in the local branch of the bank, and therefore had rung up the bank. She would have had a vicarious satisfaction if she could know how much the woman had piled up in the bank. But those awful men at the bank could in no way be persuaded to disclose that to Roma. Roma sent her little son over to the woman's place on this and that pretext in the hope of establishing some relationship with her. She had heard that actresses were fond of little children. The little boy was chubby and fair complexioned at the time. But that cherubic child soon assumed such destructive propensities, that even though she was his mother she realized that he was a complete misfit for such diplomatic missions. So, no social connection had been established with the unsuspecting film actress. And therefore, Roma had no inhibitions now about frankly proclaiming that women like that actress there were practically no better than prostitutes. Still, though that woman was not aware of it, Roma remained indebted to her on one count. Roma nowadays wore her sari always below her navel, as she had once seen the woman do.

The man next door was reputed to write dramas. Roma had heard his name in radio programmes. Any number of long haired young men and short haired women came to his place at all hours of the day. What atrocious hobnobbing went on there till past midnight! Roma was infuriated. What was that fellow up to? She had borrowed from him one or two of the plays written by him. She had gone to his place to use his telephone when her own telephone had been out of order, and had tried to engage him in small talk. He was said to write so many dramas, he must have had so many more juicy dramas in his own life, he could not surely spend

all that time with all those women visitors of all ages in discussing the scripts. Yet, let alone guide Roma across that unknown threshold he talked to her with the deference a man would reserve for the Principal of a convent. She smiled a bitter smile as she stood sideways in front of her mirror and looked over her shoulder at her well rounded arm which she voluptuously moved round this way and that. Why? Was she truly as repulsive as all that? At the end, she had screamed at the top of her voice, out of the intensity of vexation, that the man was a debauch. A debauch and an impotent male. Let him hear that. If she could provoke him into a direct confrontation with herself, she might have a little relief. But the wretch was presumably deaf as well. He made not the slightest noise in reply.

Oh! She felt so helpless. Her home was at Ballygunge. Sushanto had been born and brought up in the heart of Ballygunge. His elder brother lived in England with his uncontestably white skinned wife, but he never missed remembering his young sister-in-law when sending out gifts and good wishes in the season of the Pujas. Since the passing away of her father-in-law the savings of the family might have been eaten into in order to keep her leisure intact, but she had nothing wanting, materially. She had plenty to eat and to wear, and she slept and bought things to her heart's content. Yet, in spite of all that, it was she who had to suffer from this eternal ache in her heart. While that empty headed girl, Uma was always so happy and contented. Why was she satisfied with her lot? How was she satisfied? Must be due to her husband. Then, what was wrong with Roma? After all, she too had everything else. Her husband was not a cripple either. Then what? Then why did her husband fail to lead her by her hand, to take her over and across the threshold of romance? Was it all a mean conspiracy? Or was it due to a curious impotence? Impotent! Impotent! Over there, the wife of that vagabond-like sweeper lolled against the flowering gulmor and shamelessly tickled the back and the bare waist of her man, amorously cuddling and caressing him. She would most certainly have purred, had she been a cat. Roma shot flames through the corner of her eyes and burned inside. Dear Lord! Even those low class people of Ballygunge had got it! That hoity toity actress had got it! That good for nothing writer of dramas had got it. Only she had not got it. She had settled at Ballygunge, the land of her adolescent dreams. The other inconsequential things — she had got them all. The only thing that she had not got was the key to that thing of mystery. That what was available even to the animals, to those lowly people, which made them wriggle in pleasure, or be drunk with a deeper pleasure. Oh oh oh! On

whom could she take out her intense frustration?

Well, the grudge had necessarily to find its target in luckless Sushanto. Sushanto's mother too had seen life flow past her out of her reach. As long as Sushanto's father was alive, she had an objective ready at hand to vent her spleen on. When he died, Sushanto's mother also died in her heart. For, a Bengalee woman generally dies when her grudge dies. She had at first tried to keep alive by keeping herself occupied in wrangling with her daughter-in law, for, who wants to die so easily? But owing to the deep-rooted motivation, Roma's innate vitality assumed such devastating proportions that the older woman's stamina was no match for it. Sushanto's mother withdrew within herself. Thus, Roma, with her irresistible power, single mindedly concentrated on enjoying her leisure. And on her frantic search for the elusive romance. And now in the agony of the approaching end of the summer of her life, she relentlessly exercised her despotic right to be capricious, and made the life of soft hearted Sushanto so miserable that he gasped for breath.

Unfortunately, however, no one guessed that if Sushanto had merely practised a little firmness, if he had but given an occasional thrashing to her, and had also had playfully given her some childish indulgence — untimely and without any reason whatsoever — there might possibly have been at least a partial solution of this singular problem of conjugal existence. But, because he too, like many other weak-kneed Bengalee males, only tried to control Roma by applying dull logic, her insane sense of loss and anger increased and turned into outright loathing. Poor Sushanto indulged his undesirable addiction practically at all hours of the day. He increased the amount of the drinks that he took. He nearly lost his job while trying to steal drinks at his place of work. After rescuing the job from the crisis, he took to drinking cheap illegally distilled spirits. Drinking any kind of rubbish that he could get whenever he could get it, he developed painful ulcers in the stomach. As a result, his drinking bouts and the violent scenes of Roma were halted for the time being. But as soon as he regained his health, both started afresh. This time with redoubled vehemence.

The fire raging in Roma knew no abating now. Right from early morning till late in the evening she screamed at everybody for everything. Occasionally, she dressed up, sprinkled a quantity of perfume on herself, and briskly stepped out, modelling herself on the young wife of the new tenant on the ground floor. The difference was, the other one was a working woman and therefore had a specific destination, while Roma had none. Yet out in the street, she cooled down. Relapsing into the

habit of her younger days, she kept her eyes open — lest she missed something happening there. Though now she also pretended that she was a busy woman, as if she had to keep some appointment at a certain hour at a certain place. Meanwhile her mother-in-law and the much harassed servants could breathe a little freely. Within an hour or two, however, she would come back, for some reason or other she would lose her equanimity, and would resume her screaming fury. If Sushanto happened to be at home, he invariably went out and sat in the country-liquor shop on the fringe of the locality. When he returned home, sprawling in a rickshaw, he didn't have the capacity to climb the stairs. He huddled in a semi-conscious state on the narrow cemented bench there or straight away lay down flat upon it. The male cook and the servant half carried, half helped him upstairs. If he felt like it, he threw up what he had taken. And then he fell into a drunken sleep, snoring loudly. For a few hours the fellow was safe from the terrible torment.

Roma also found for herself a route of temporary escape. Shouting herself hoarse through the whole day tired out even that powerful constitution of hers by evening. In a way she relished this feeling of tiredness, unconsciously associating it with the maniacal shopping sprees occasioned by the *Pujas* or a marriage in the family — shopping being the only other kind of hard labour known to her. After bathing her tired frame, and putting on a garland of fragrant buds of *bal* — she stretched herself out in great luxury on the cot kept on the rooftop terrace. Little light reached there. The bustling sounds from other people's households softly reached her ears across the intervening distance. Partially under the soporific recollection of half-remembered childhood memories, partly under the fatigue of the day-long disquiet, and partly due to the physical separation from all those so invariably deceitful human beings, she felt a little drugged. She was faintly intoxicated with the shadowy dimness of the light. At that particular moment, she did not think that she had the smallest relationship of give and take with a single person in the wide world. In her own reckoning, she was done with all duties and all obligations. In her absolute independence, now, she trembled upon the brink of a bottomless, shoreless, immense unconscious. She never figured it out, intellect was foreign to her, but maybe, at that moment when her heart felt like melting, she was poised for the great transcendence, — a merger with the Supreme Being. Unknown to that tortured soul, the Supreme Being did make an appearance over her horizon at that moment.

At the slightest frown of the Omnipotent, cataclysmic thunder rained

down. In this case, at His infinitesimal smile, hundreds of megawatts of electricity were drained off in a moment from the farflung circulatory system of the metropolis. Along with those of millions of other citizens, the environment of Roma too was plunged into an untimely blackout. In the embrace of the unaccustomed darkness, the absorbed soul of the woman murmured, 'Oh my heart! Oh the enchanting darkness. Auntie Bhami told us the tale of the pair of magic wands, holding the secrets of life and death, deep in the mysterious depths of the magic pool, and now for me too, all that remains to do is to wait, only to wait for the Prince Charming, to await his touching me with the stick of life.'

By some queer turn of fate, the Prince Charming really appeared. Her Prince drew his strength from strong drinks, the strength to dominate and to have his own way. Today he was full of that strength. Even in the darkness, the open terrace there was so very lacking in privacy. Timid by nature, Sushanto, scorned that obstacle today. He had lost his youthfulness, but that was of no consequence. Indisciplined living had added to his bodyfat, that also did not matter. Strangely passive, Roma found herself carried almost over and across that ever elusive ankle high threshold by the surging sweaty passion of her husband. Oh my Dear! Is this the thing? A little more please, only a very little more, please carry me a little further, I shall not speculate about it any more, I shall not ask anything more, just get me there, please let me remain there for all eternity. Thus cast up on the crest of the massive wave at the loin of the great lightless city, Roma spent the better part of the next fortnight reliving the spellbinding memory of a few deep dark ecstatic moments. This too was somewhat unprecedented for her. She had never had any use for recollecting the recent past.

But for how long could one get by ruminating upon past pleasure? That total metropolitan darkness did not happen every day. Even when there was a powercut, Aghore might drop in, calling for his 'Little Governor', the grandson so dear to him. Or some other impediment might crop up to prevent her going up to the terrace. Or even when she would arrive there, arrive there with a tremulous heart, and even if the throbbing hairy darkness gathered her up into its embrace, her Prince Charming might be absent, or he might not have shed his inhibitions or, due to too much drinking, he might have attained another kind of imbecility — so, the Prince would be there, but not the magic wand. Alas, no, the magic wand was not there. She came to be possessed by her old obsession in its new shape. As the spells of darkness grew deeper and longer in the life of the metropolis, her impatience too threatened to get

absolutely out of control. At long last, at this late hour, she had caught a glimpse of the tip of the tower of that castle of mystery. All those long years of privation of hers had not gone in vain, here was her own Prince, now she had had a fleeting touch of the magic wand. O Lord, please be kind, please be bountiful, please do not tantalize me any more, the time is almost over.

But under the onslaught of incessant violence, too much lack of peace, Sushanto with his little intelligence and a soft heart had completely lost his wits. He had no inkling of what took place when and why. On some evenings when Roma had got drunk with pleasure, he like a gust of wind found and scattered self confidence. But a gust of wind spends itself in a spendthrift moment. Then, the cheated, frustrated, impatient Roma's bites, scratchings and intense obscenities of language drained out his desire for life, not to speak of his self confidence. Simple minded Roma, in hunting for the roots of love, merely stirred up the pungent mud of violent desperation. In the mind of Sushanto too, was gradually awakened the violence of a coward driven to desperation. The venom is so potent in the instinct of self preservation of a weak willed person. Right at the heart of the crisis-ridden metropolis the two children of God approached the last act in the drama of life and death.

Over the last few days, the electricity crisis had exceeded all limits. Through the entire day there had been no fan, at dusk there was no light. All were gasping. Roma burned from two sides, from the inside and from the outside, and only counted the hours to her strange tryst every evening. But the hours passed by. The Prince, for some reason or other, made no appearance. Roma in her intense fixation spared nobody. Her mother-in-law, Sushanto, the two children, the servants, all lay shattered under the lashings of her poisonous tongue. There was no rain, not a whisper of breeze, no fan moved, no light shone, no relief anywhere. She somehow finished her evening bath, and anxiously climbed up to the terrace, toying with the ubiquitous string of the ivory-like buds of fragrant *bel*. She must be there to keep her vigil for an hour or two. The other inmates of the house too had learned to wait for that welcome interval. That was the single oasis of peace in their tortured lives. Her mother-in-law, completely at the end of her tether, lay in the darkness, with a fan in her hand. In the impolite heat of the kerosene lantern the two children shyly tried to behave as children should. Fragments of their playful noise reached the ears of Roma but raised no ripple in her consciousness. The servants gossiped among themselves in low voices. The sound floated up of the cook slapping at his chewing



tobacco as he mixed it with lime. Roma shut her eyes upon the immense bowl of the night turned upside down, prickly with myriads of stars. For she wanted to see the bottom of the darkness. She did not trust her senses, she had alerted her soul to catch any signal of the approaching Prince. She did not pray for him to come, for, he must come.

The night deepened. The sounds of the city grew dim. The sky held its breath and came closer, blackening out everything. Heavy footsteps noiselessly came up the stairs. Their deep inaudible vibrations echoed right in her womb. In icy ecstasy she lay still like a cadaver, without making the least shift in her position. The Prince halted for a moment at the landing, and then the hushed terrace quivered to his soundless tread as he came up and stood by the bare cot. A too familiar fragrance saturated the atmosphere. For a split second her consciousness hazily registered an unknown sound, small and sharp, as if a powerful machine had got out of control and was clicking on and on in a devilish frequency. What was that? The next instant, however, whatever little capacity for thinking she had was wiped out. In an irresistible impulse Sushanto leaped upon her inert body. She did not actively help him, nor did she hinder him, she simply accepted him in full. The awesome whirlpool of a dark joy pulled her away with a breathtaking quickness. Violently swinging, she plunged down into the bottomless pit of the vortex. Faster, quicker. Ah — immensely powerful mountains of revolving waters loomed over her on all sides. That was her couch — those frothing slopes of water, those were the walls of her prison too. Her hands, her feet, the bodily features, her character — nothing existed anymore, nor were they necessary. Should she only let herself be carried down that angry, dark, liquid tunnel, to attain that ultimate for which there had been so much pain, all that yearning? Yes, that was perhaps the first time that she wept in joy. But that too was trivial. At that moment of supreme crisis in the life of that woman of little intelligence and coarse of body, Man once again realized that there was no real distinction between tears and laughter. As the great darkness transcended into light, at that hairline of time when intense pleasure — indistinguishable from intense pain — was poised for the tremendous strike to pierce her heart through, her intelligence awakened, she effortlessly understood that Sushanto was about to kill her. But what fear did death hold for her, now that she had achieved so easy a command over the original rhythm of life?

Not the slightest breeze was there. As the still air was strangled out of her throat under the press of congealed fragrance, it became clear to her that Sushanto in his madness had poured out the entire contents of her

dearest jar of scent upon the soft pillow. No, it could be no irony at her unbridled fancy for perfumes, there certainly could be no distinction between the height of rage and the most consuming desire. She was only a little pained by the grinding of his teeth. But small imperfections also were unavoidable parts of life. That she once waved her hand was only to say, 'Dearest mine, I love you, right now I have got the quest of my love, whatever you may think of it, you are but loving me, these harsh abrasive utterances of yours are but our love-talk.'

Some unearthly stereo strummed and blared. What massive waves of sound. One's eardrums and the very brain felt like exploding. Deeper and deeper darkness rushed in. Bursting asunder the very womb of darkness, gigantic fountains of dark fireworks welled up in an anguish of unbearable pain or pleasure. The long forgotten Aunt Bharni revealed herself in a staccato of discontinuous moments of visibility as that fountain of black light spewed in spasms. 'Aunty, dear, I have got the Magic Wand.' There stood Aghore, roaring in laughter in his simplicity of a trader, crying to her, 'Darling, you just be sure that the account balances.'

First published in AMRITA (11 January 1980), a mass circulation weekly of Calcutta. The original title ABHIGAMINI, a little used word now, literally means a woman making a special kind of journey, particularly to meet her lover. Today's standard colloquial idiom being inadequate for the theme and the mood, a somber, chaste Bengali was used in the text.

# G. S. Sharat Chandra

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## TAMIL MOVIE BOX OFFICE HIT

Hero, son of factory owner turned reformist  
meets heroine, daughter of labourer in the same.  
Villain, the foreman, has been chasing her around  
steps, spools and ladders.  
It's love at cafeteria queue.  
Heroine goes AWOL with hero to romp around  
water-falls & muddy buffaloes, singing many hit songs.  
Villain, hiding behind a stoned goddess sees everything  
reports everything to heroine's father  
who locks up heroine then confronts the hero  
with a speech worthy of Lenin or Trotsky or both.  
Hero wallows in nightclubs & debauchery  
drinking imported whisky always with the label  
turned towards the audience.  
Whisky improves his complexion  
though he bewails his organs are bleeding.  
An hour of this later  
villain is discovered as a true imperialist  
secretly planning overthrow of the Workers' Union.  
Hero sobers up fast, chases villain  
by bullock cart, lorry, horse & jeep.  
Hero & villain lock hand in hand in combat  
deliver many blows to each other  
to the offstage accompaniment of tabla.  
At last villain falls with much blood & redundancy.  
Hero, heroine, father & the working class quickly gather  
for a group photograph under framed revolutionaries  
for the 17th week at the Republic cinema  
at 10 Rupees for a third class ticket in black market.

## INDIAN FILM KISS CONTROL

(Indian censors have recently allowed kissing on the screen)

Depending on the length of the movie  
a maximum of kisses is negotiable.  
Invariably kisses should best be accompanied  
by dialogue how the lips are fated to come together.  
The lower class may kiss the upper class  
if the movie is for export.

Where a brahmin has to kiss a whore  
background music should make it clear  
it's a bad habit:  
sexual germs passing from mouth to mouth  
animated to the tune of sitars  
is one way of proving it.

Ass kissing of any manner is strictly prohibited  
Where the scene calls for an ass  
a washerman should be riding it.  
No French kissing is allowed  
we have enough problems with Danish.

We should bear in mind  
we cannot let overkissing lead to overpopulating.  
The Russians have already kissed off Afghanistan  
we must not let them kiss us off too.

## HINDU PILGRIMAGE

Up on a nondescript hill a legend  
nurtures this god as a mortal besieged  
by wine & women, who ascended to his crest  
hotly pursued by cuckolded husbands,  
then vaporized to an even higher sanctuary  
leaving his mortality in an imprint of stone.

His mythic antecedents thus established,  
the black god stands dazzling  
pilgrims from the high and the lowly,  
for who's there that does not need  
quick solutions from courtly folly.

The high priest when properly appeased  
can expedite the pilgrim's petition  
placing flowers in the ears of the lord,  
then reading omens in their withered fall:  
to expect the god's consort to join in the lottery  
you need to cough up a special joining fee.

Each year pilgrims trudge up the hill  
buttocks pushed into their haunches  
like the engines of Volkswagen,  
to the technicolor sideshow of professionals  
brandishing cracked bowls, mangled limbs.  
The steps to climb are massive,  
built that way to humble the flesh,  
melt excess sin.

You'll hear the rich chant,  
give our husbands that special position,  
our daughters movie stars,  
our sons virgin brides with money for cars,  
in short, give us everything  
we've given you so far.

Win or lose they all return  
each year with renewed fervor,  
blessed with chant, camphor,  
they'll either die or recover:  
oracular mind has no faith in equity,  
compliance is not complicity.

# Indian Art: Transforming Symbols

*Jyoti Sahi is one of the most fascinating of modern Indian painters. Prabhu S. Guptara reflects on the recent exhibition of his work in London and his simultaneously released book on Indian symbols.*

Jyoti Sahi is an unassuming and soft-spoken man. Bespectacled, bearded, and of medium build, he is not the sort of person who would be noticed in a group of artists. Indeed, he would probably not wish to be noticed. That, of course, is a fatal drawback to anyone in today's frantically self-assertive artistic world. But the quality of Sahi's art, and his theoretical work, should combine to win him lasting attention in the long run.

His observations on South Indian folk culture over several years of residence there, and his reading and thinking over some decades, have resulted in a massively impressive but ambiguous book, *The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, £6.95). Sahi has the associative and synthetic mind characteristic of an artist, but he has, in addition, developed the discipline of punting scholarship and observation on paper in an organized and accessible manner. It is of course easy to disagree with his assumptions: he errs on the side of an eclectic and universalistic catholicism, which leaves the book with an air of having staggered to an all-encompassing close rather than of having arrived at a conclusion; but the comprehensiveness does remain remarkable.

Starting with symbols of opposition such as dark and light, and the one and the many, he goes on to cover the whole range: the womb and the tomb, transfiguring energy and magic, sacred space and dance, the moon and the feminine in Indian thought, the sun and the tree, and finally, the serpent and the child, who in his view represent an eternal effort at renewal and wholeness.

Indian traditional painting and music provide him with as much material as do architecture and sculpture and the everyday practices of Indian villagers — who are neither as simple nor as naïve as they are sometimes imagined. But their culture does not place the same value on verbalizing as does Western culture, and Sahi's contribution is to attempt to put into words a whole complex of living and feeling and seeing which is obscured not only from the West but also from the urbanized Indian.

What makes Sahi's book most interesting to a Western reader — its Jungian outlook — is also what raises questions for an Indian reader. For his masterly exposition of material occasionally and imperceptibly slips into tendentious interpretations: Sahi's theoretical categories are a peculiar but distinctively personal and original mixture of Indian and Western. As indeed is his practice.

St Martin-Within-Ludgate, where the exhibition of his work was held, just a few yards away from St Paul's, is a dull sort of place, architecturally as well as artistically. The overall impression that Sahi's work made in these surroundings was overwhelming: the vivid Indian colours against the dull white of the walls, the dirty brown of the pews; the strange Indian shapes, forms, and designs against the anonymously second-rate nineteenth century paintings above the crucifix and side walls.

That the exhibition took place in a church was appropriate, though. Sahi was born and brought up in India, but studied and taught art in London before returning to join Dom Bede Griffiths' experimental Christian ashram (an Indian equivalent of a monastery) in South India. Sahi is now one of the foremost of the new breed of Indian Catholic artists whose work combines deeply traditional Indian art forms (usually folk forms rather than classical ones) with Christian themes. The result is pleasing to (non-Christian) Indian eyes — witness the wide sale of their material in Indian markets by members of the Association of Indian Christian Artists. The enterprising Jesuits have in fact set up a minor industry, Art India, around the printing of the work of these artists, in the form of large framable pictures, greetings cards, post cards, letter forms, and small pictures. While such activity would be impossible in the West, of course — quite apart from being regarded as hopelessly unprofessional — Art India's products are beginning to fill a real gap in the market for indigenous art available to the masses at reasonable prices. Art India has also published two little booklets of Sahi's paintings (*The Way of the Cross* and *St John's Gospel*), for which Sahi has provided some comment, designed to assist meditation on the paintings.



*From a snake stone at Srirangapatnam*



*Womb-lotus symbols — a roundel from the Bhamburda stupas  
carvings probably representing Brahma. The theme is  
closely related to the later Padma-Nabha: a creator figure  
from whose navel emerges a flowering lotus stem, symbol  
of the universe*



Along with an Indian symbolic tradition, these paintings draw upon an iconographic tradition that belongs to Eastern Orthodox as well as Roman churches. There is a Blakean energy in these paintings, tempered by the curvilinear feminine forms which dominate Indian art and music. Mandala forms nudge mandorla forms, traditional kolam patterns (usually traced in rice powder on village doorsteps) combine with distinctively Buddhist motifs such as the open palm. Sahi ranges, in fact, as far afield as Taoist yin-yang patterns (which probably came into Indian folk art through the human grapevines which took Indian Buddhism, for example, into China and brought Chinese sages to India). And yet, the very universality of folk forms has the result that Western viewers will be reminded of Rouault by Sahi's paintings, while his wood-cuts recall Dürer in a curious way.

Though there was very little in the exhibition to reflect this, Sahi has also studied the Indian Muslim tradition of painting and has done some exquisite work for the little church in Srinagar, Kashmir, which portrays scenes from the life of Jesus in Islamic rather than traditional Indian terms. The Islamic world is of course closer to that of Jesus than the Advaitic one, and it is difficult to resist the impression that his Islamic experiments, at their best, come closer to combining a genuinely Indian tradition with a genuine Christian one. His experiments with folk motifs are more satisfying visually, but where Sahi draws upon classical Indian traditions there is a tendency towards the abstract which, in lesser hands, may distort the distinctive Biblical balance between what might be called the 'personal' nature of God, and that in Him which transcends merely human personality. In combining such diverse philosophical and visual traditions, Sahi's is some of the most stimulating Indian work to have been exhibited in Britain in the last few years.

# Zulfikar Ghose

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## IN PRAISE OF HOT WEATHER

What I like is loss of energy, the feeling  
of complete incompetence and the desire  
to do nothing; I enjoy, too, the memory  
of gardens in the gaudy tropics where

hibiscus flowers bloom in the heat  
and one sits in a public square with its  
slow fountain and watches the brown  
young girls in pink frocks, laughing

as they walk arm in arm, a hand thrown  
across the white protuberant teeth.  
I enjoy inconsequential fantasies  
that come with the humid breeze.

There seems no sense to inventing ways  
of survival in hostile environments  
and the busy seriousness of people in  
the colder latitudes is really laughable.

In cold weather I dream of pomegranate flowers  
and have delusions of the fragrance of mango-blossoms.  
I long to be where I can be lazy, lying  
in a hammock, listening to a distant flute.

I think that out of such a purposeless  
waiting for sunsets, the hour when  
the jasmine exudes its perfume and lovers  
meet under the mimosas, could come an existence

of a perfectly senseless fertility:  
the way it is in the humid tropics —  
things just growing in a great confusion,  
the earth's species competing blindly,

absorbing the moisture and the heat  
for nothing more extraordinary than  
existence itself, the vines climbing up  
the tall trees to be, somehow, in the sun.

## AMONG OTHER THINGS

A failure, one concludes, observing the manner  
in which the tulip tree's startlingly perfect blossoms  
are torn by the wind, their porcelain appearance —  
as if nature took its model from the five grimy  
towns of Staffordshire — shattering against  
the concrete driveway, an effect  
no different from a fine thought being distracted  
by the neighbour suddenly turning loud his stereo.

Among other things, one can't suppress the memory  
that places one under the shade of mango trees  
where one sees how fallen and inedible fruit,  
gone putrid with infestations of insects, can still  
evoke the comical odours of adolescent passions.  
Like the fruitless mulberry tree whose foliage thrives  
on being regularly sprayed with insecticide,  
one lives on small dosages of diluted, secret poisons.

## 'Can You Imagine Anything More Australian?':<sup>1</sup> Bruce Beresford's 'Breaker Morant'

### Some 'Realities':

The guerrilla war was fast brutalizing both adversaries. The worst scandals on the British side concerned colonial irregulars — Australians, Canadians and South Africans — whose official contingents, ironically, had won a reputation for gallantry in so many set-piece battles. The most notorious case involved a special anti-commando unit, raised by Australians to fight in the wild northern Transvaal, and called the Bush Veldt Carbineers. Six of its officers (five Australians, one Englishman) were court-martialled for multiple murder. The facts were admitted: in August 1901, 12 Boers, earlier taken prisoner, had been shot by the Carbineers on the orders of their officers. The Australians' defence: as a reprisal, shooting prisoners was now accepted practice. Two of the Australian officers, Lieutenants 'Breaker' Morant and Handcock, were executed in February 1902, on the orders of Kitchener. The affair caused an outcry in Australia. There arose a misconception (still current) that foreign political pressures had induced Kitchener to make scapegoats of Morant and Handcock. In fact Kitchener's motives were cruder: evidence of his own army's indiscipline drove him wild with frustration.

(Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, Publishers, in association with Weylandfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979)

A spy-story that has become legendary ... needs revision. Early in February a mean creature named Colyn offered himself as a recruit to Commandant Bouver's commando, betrayed his comrades for English gold and brought some of them to their deaths. The Boers caught Colyn and brought him before Smuts. The wretched creature wept and howled and begged for his life but he deserved death and he suffered it... So far this often-told story is true. But Deneyz Reitz and other writers have over-dramatised the part that Smuts played in it. They have put into his mouth some implacable words, 'Wat hom weg en skiet hom dood'.... If Smuts did say something like this, he said it not as a man presuming to inflict death upon a fellow man by his own arbitrary will, but as the president of a duly constituted military

court. The records of the court were written out at length in a school exercise book which is preserved among Smuts's papers. They include depositions under oath of the witnesses and of the prisoner, all duly signed and counter signed, and sentence of the court delivered in due form by its president. The procedure was scrupulously correct and the verdict was just.

(W H. Harcock, *Smuts: The Sanguine Years 1876-1919* Cambridge University Press, 1962)

### Some Representations and Reactions:

When they speak of heroes ... of villains ... of men who look for action, who choose between honour and revenge they tell the story of ... Breaker Morant. The official Australian entry at the 1980 Cannes Film Festival ... winner of 10 Australian film awards ... and acclaimed as Australia's Most Important, Powerful and Forceful Motion Picture Ever!

(*The Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 12 September 1980)

**BREAKER MORANT.** ROYAL GALA CHARITY PREMIERE in the presence of HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE OF WALES... To Aid the SOS-Stars Organisation for Spastics and the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council.

(Information supplied by the Australian High Commission, London, October 1980)

a muscular picture that I think will prove much to the liking of South African audiences, and in Zimbabwe ... Nearly 20 countries have snapped up the chance to screen the picture ... including Mozambique and Angola.

(Dirk de Villiers, *The Star* (Johannesburg), 12 July 1980)



The story of an Imperial military scandal, eight decades and several wars later, has become respectable enough for royally-supported, Commonwealth-wide philanthropy, as an originally dissident, popular tale is incorporated into an Australian-funded, mass-popular commodity. Besides receiving a standing ovation at the Cannes film festival, it has been profitable as well, grossing Australian \$2 million in Australia and half a million overseas.<sup>2</sup> 'At the risk of a back-handed compliment ... the best Australian film we've seen [in London] for ... years' (Christ Peachment, *Time Out*), is now showing at three London cinemas after the BBC previewed its 'virile' appeal; and the most uninterested, exhausted wage-slave finds him or herself ordered to view it by Uncle Sam-type 'recruiting' posters aiming with phallic accuracy at the tube and bus traveller: as mundane and typical an example of 'interpellation' as one could wish for. Named for a legendary figure, and centring on his court martial and death (the last 'Australian' soldier executed in the Imperial Army), 'Breaker Morant' is a further variation, in a modern mass medium, of an already mythologised incident of the Second Anglo-Boer War: the conviction of Australian soldiers for allegedly murdering Boer prisoners. Although filmed in South Australia, considerable effort was devoted to approximating the look of the scenery of the last area of Boer resistance around Pietersburg, Kitchener's headquarters in Pretoria, and (not with entire success!) 'Afrikaan' dialogue. A London previewer, Dirk de Villiers of *The Star*, assumed the film would interest South Africans when he speculated whether some split-second scenes depicting an Australian officer's sexual escapes with two married Boer women would be cut. And a film that seems anti-Imperialist and, to some extent, anti-British, without the clichés, distortions and hagiography of Afrikaaner nationalist ideology could well appeal to some South African audiences (de Villiers draws no distinctions — does he mean 'Whites Only'?)

But 'Breaker Morant' is a sophisticated but still patent endorsement of equivalent Australian national mythologies. Despite its 'South African' backdrop and fidelity to historical detail,<sup>3</sup> 'Breaker Morant' offers neither historical reconstruction nor interpretation, despite one reviewer's claim that 'No other Australian film has more convincingly established the mood, as well as the look, of a historical period — not even Phil Noyce's *Newsfront* [or] Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*.' The credits list a military and a legal adviser, but no historian as such; nor should accuracy and analysis necessarily be expected. For 'Breaker Morant's' director/writer Bruce Beresford is working within the constraints and confines of a typical, obsessional Aus-

tralian story-type: the Australian male's usually unsuccessful quest for self-assertion, frequently taking place in the hostile environment of the former metropolis or in the trenches and frontlines of an Imperial battlefield. Beresford also made the two 'Barry Mackenzie' films. Anyone who has watched 'Barza's' picaresque misadventures among the Poms will realise that 'Breaker Morant's' structure is almost identical: a Barry Mackenzie film by other means. For Barry's self-flattering and scatological comedy, substitute irony and tragedy; for tourism in the former colonial capital, substitute Imperial warfare ('Join the Army and see the world', as one of the Bushveldt Carbineers, Morant's regiment, remarks). Either story celebrates essential characteristics of Australian national 'identity': anti-English, male chauvinist, cynical rather than critical, spontaneously rather than self-reflectively oppositional, and aggressively, anarchistically individualist. The film's representation of history, although a useful point of entry for a review, is not a sufficient basis for criticism: its structure (a simplistic antagonism between Imperial and colonial values, 'colonial' a catch-all signifying 'irregular', 'intemperate', 'impetuous', 'wild', but also 'effective', 'pragmatic') and effects (the kind of audience identification/misrecognition that draws easy applause and unself-conscious laughter) are ideologically motivated first of all. 'Breaker Morant' has only the manifest appearance of history: its meanings are best sought by interrogating the ideological implications of its form.

'Breaker Morant's' realism and documentation should not blind us to the fact that we're getting a traditional Australian tale retold, its appeal springing from the archetypes and stereotypes it revitalises. Yet the assurance of its closed mode does not entirely obscure the complexities and ragged ends of the original story: complexities to which it alludes but without exploring their ramifications. Material for more subtle and searching treatment is available but unused, as if the conventions and expectations of the genre have outweighed the feasibility of challenging its limitations from within. Alert viewers will note the implications of the authoritative, if anonymous, introductory titles which 'summarise' the Boer War: 'The causes were complex, but basically the Boers wished to preserve their independence from Britain.' (Something which, politically at least, and at exactly the same time — 1901 — the Australian colonies were achieving through Federation.) Displacing (or ignoring) such factors as race and class onto nationality is a mystification occurring throughout: the last words penned by Lt. Handcock (a junior officer of the BVC, executed with Morant) are 'Australia Forever, Amen'.

(*Gender*, very significantly, hardly matters at all, a point to which I return.) Kitchener is allocated a line to mention gold and diamonds influencing possible German intervention, but 'basically' (as the film would say) we are presented with a Boer War without the struggle of international mining capital to control the resources and labour of the Witwatersrand. Of course, many Australian volunteers (and there were many — more than half of the 30,000 troops from colonies outside South Africa) did conceive of their duty in terms of a conflated Imperial and racial loyalty nationally or locally inflected (the names of their regiments, such as the 'Queensland Imperial Bushmen', indicate this). For them the question, 'How many sides are you fighting on?' (as a disgusted Hancock demands of a Boer collaborator) would have received an obvious, single answer.

But for others the war questioned and threatened their complicated affiliations. The Irish-Australian Hubert Murray, later Lieutenant-Governor of the Australian Territory of Papua, although 'bitterly opposed' to the war, nonetheless organised his New South Wales Irish Rifles to fight with the Imperial Army, while a small Irish cohort fought on the side of the Boers. Because the film's signifying structure, typical of popularised stories, consists of over-simplified oppositions generating stock characters, symbols (the military paraphernalia throughout) and voiced 'messages', objective historical contradictions are displaced or absent, and mediations and links are suppressed. In some regards Boer and (Australian) Bushman had more in common than Boer or Bushman with Briton, but this similarity is not stressed. 'Breaker Morant' does occasionally refer to fratricidal aspects of the war, as when Kitchener and his aide Ian Hamilton briefly speculate about the loyalty of an Anglo-Irish officer on their staff. He is, they conclude, more Anglo- than Irish, and therefore to be protected *even though* guilty of the same 'war crime' as the Australians. (The film does not pursue the irony that the Australians were acquitted of the charge they were very probably guilty of — murdering a German missionary — and executed for deeds which, arguably, and with greater or lesser scrupulousness, were committed by both sides, as Hancock's account of a similar although not identical Boer incident quoted at the beginning of this paper suggests.)

The biographical Harry Morant was the black sheep of an Anglo-Irish and County English family who repudiated him even after his death. His social position seems to have been ambivalent and agonising enough to facilitate his recognition that colonials and outcasts made useful pawns. ('Hell! All on account of unity of Empire!' he wrote during his court



martial, ending the letter with, 'God save Oireland!')<sup>8</sup> His sacrifice, or crucifixion as he called it, as a 'scapegoat of Empire', has contributed ever since to making him an Australian folk hero by adoption; another factor was his ballad-making. In the 1890s, during a hard-drinking existence of cattle-droving and horse-breaking, he wrote for *The Bulletin*, a widely-read, brash, nationalist Sydney weekly. (Its centenary issue of 29 January 1980 reprints his 1895 'In Such a Night'.) Beresford has skillfully selected portions of 'The Breaker's' verse as ironic and emotive comment, particularly as the film moves towards its pre-ordained close. Comparing the elegiac singing of 'A Soldier of the Queen' by Breaker Morant in the film to its demagogic, raucous rendition in the BBC 2's televised interviews with two surviving British veterans of Modder River and Twerfontein, for instance (the first in a series of 'Yesterday's Witness: Distant Guns' programmes, shown in London on 9 November 1980), testifies to the enduring power of this predominantly collective, oral form. The role of ballads within the film could be viewed as models of the process of popular legendary creation of which Beresford's film is a most recent extension.

But the personality of 'the Byron of the Bushveldt Carbineers, the Tennyson of the Transvaal, quite a Renaissance man' as the British sarcastically dub him, has remained problematic (for another slant, see the enumeration supplied by Russell Ward, author of *The Australian Legend*: 'a confidence man, a cheat, a bare-faced liar, possibly the greatest male chauvinist pig of all time, a sponger, an exhibitionist, a racist and a sadist').<sup>9</sup> Hence the film's emphasis (and, it seems, misrepresentation and exaggeration) of the all-Australian Handcock, who is assigned the manly qualities of inarticulacy, cultural ignorance, and subordination or denigration of women. During the court martial, questioned about his 'visits' to two Boer women, in one afternoon, he comments, 'They say a slice off a cut loaf is never missed.'

Nor would these fragmentary scenes be missed if cut; but the representation of women, such as it is, deserves attention because of the 'obviousness' of their marginality and muting in the Australian picaresque genre to which, in this respect, 'Breaker Morant' emphatically belongs. The toast proposed by Morant — 'To Freedom, Australia, Horses and Women' — gets the priorities about right. Not that one necessarily expects women to play major roles in a film about guerrilla warfare. But it is important to notice that, when they do briefly appear (always in relation to the male protagonists, and in flashbacks or dreams), Handcock's wife is faceless and voiceless, and Morant's fiancée

speechless. (She is the sister of his friend Captain Hunt, whose murder and mutilation by Boers instigates Morant's campaign of vengeance, including the vow to take 'no more prisoners'.) The credits identify the 'English-speaking' (as pointed out, none of them actually does speak) women in their kinship relations to the male characters ('the strongest line-up of male talent in an Australian film since *'Sunday [Too Far Away]'*):<sup>9</sup> they are themselves nameless, and the 'Boer girls', of course, are unintelligible to most viewers.

Sex is displaced onto singing when Morant performs some of his own verses set to music. We, voyeuristically, and as *males*, gaze protractedly at his fiancée at the same time as he and Hunt do. The affective relationship between the men, sealed by exchanging her, is signalled by these lingering looks of appropriation. Hunt confers her; Morant celebrates the possibility of claiming her someday. The brevity of such a sophisticated scene contrasts forcibly with the more frequent, sexist playing-to-the-gallery which encourages speculation about the necessity of the latter in popular Australian cinema. It's as if, in the circuit of production, distribution, exchange, and reception, the expectations (and gender?) of those who relish the Barry Mackenzie films — without seeming to realise they are themselves lampooned — reacted upon Beresford's latest script. The pandering to sexist conventions undermines the effectiveness of what should be the most powerful and moving scene. Certainly it is the most technically accomplished, as a brief resort to slow motion extends the seconds between the shots of the firing squad and Morant and Handcock's deaths. The two men go hand in hand to their execution, accompanied, in Brisbane at least, by giggles and cat-calls from an evening audience which, when younger, probably preferred its Saturday matinees with 'lots of blood and no women'. The Australian glorification of male 'mateship' vies with the horror of any physical expression of emotion between men — and loses.

'Breaker Morant' is 'about' a number of surface messages.

'This is what comes of Empire building.' (Morant)

'If you're mug enough to join a Pommy regiment, you can take what's coming to you.' (Handcock)

If you encounter any Boers,  
You really must not loot 'em,  
And if you wish to leave these shores,  
For pity's sake don't shoot 'em.'  
(One of Morant's last poems)

'The tragedy is that these horrors are committed by normal men in abnormal conditions' (Major Thomas, the defence counsel), begging questions about what 'normality' might be: does 'war change men's natures'? Isn't a 'lawless' or 'irregular' situation still embedded in, and constructed by, social relations to which it also contributes?

Political expediency which has little to do with justice.  
(*The Courier-Mail*, 20 September 1980)

Where do orders stop and personal morality take over?  
(Dirk de Villiers, *The Star*, 12 July 1980)

'...a group of men with a strong central character «having a go» defying the system of authority'  
(Matt Carroll, 'Breaker Morant's' producer, quoted in Peter Welch, 'Breaker: Best Thing Since «Sunday»', in *Trans-Australia Airline's* in-flight magazine distributed during August, 1980, p. 28)

In the BVC of 1901 may be distinguished an ugly phenomenon that pululated throughout this century, spawning the Black and Tans ... as well as the Lieutenant Calleys of modern times.  
(B. Connolly, 'Australian Directors: The Films of Bruce Beresford', *Cinema Papers* No 28, August-September 1980, p. 18)

However, if, as most foreign audiences must do, one is confined to the film's language of cinematic techniques, what does 'Breaker Morant' say about 'how the concrete historical forces of a particular period have become concentrated in the life of this particular individual'?<sup>19</sup>

The polarised advertisements ('Hero or Villain?') simplify a more daunting intellectual task facing Beresford and his audience: how to achieve (in Lukács' slightly outdated terminology), 'dramatic plasticity, individualization, and, at the same time, historicism'? (Lukács, p. 138). If 'the individuality of the dramatic hero is the decisive problem' (Lukács, p. 129), how to create, not an ideological mouthpiece, but 'a figure in whom the deepest individual and personal traits merge with historical authenticity and truth to form an organic, inseparable, directly effective unity'? (Lukács, p. 128). The title, by focussing upon Morant (more precisely, by focussing on his nickname, which preselects and highlights a forceful aspect of his personality), invites speculation about his part in shaping and being shaped by history. Thus the internecine Imperial conflict can be viewed as a projection/externalisation of his divided consciousness, and he, in turn, embodies contradictory social forces. But how does Beresford conceive of the mutually determining

relationships between individual biography and history? After a number of viewings, one can still find it difficult to be sure, in part because the screenplay borrows unevenly from a mixture of fictional and historical sources: differing narrative modes which convey and contain varying notions about historical and social conditioning of character. Ken Ross's play about the court martial is the screenplay's core: the producer Matt Carroll admits that it 'showed the way' with the promising but apparently intractable material contained in Kit Denton's novel *The Breaker*. 'In drama everything revolves around the reflection of ... critical and crisis-producing heightening and climaxes of life, because this is the centre whence the parallelogram of forces ... arises' (Lukács, p. 123), and by using the court martial as the episode around which all other action, past and future, revolves, 'Breaker Morant' resorts to the 'calling to account' in one's dying hour which, from classical times if not before, has taken the form of revealing 'the bankruptcy of an erring life ... in a compressed and concentrated form' (Lukács, p. 124). Such a form, Lukács claims, is actually vitiated by 'so-called period details describing individual historical facts': 'The description of the times, of specific historical factors is in drama only a means of giving the collision [of a character with her/his «fate»] itself a clear and concrete expression' (Lukács, p. 176).

But the screenplay also contains the implied priorities and viewpoints of more 'factual' forms such as official history and revendicatory biography. The resultant clash of focusses produces a decentred character (or, more accurately, a protagonist split amongst three characters: Morant, Handcock and Thomas). Morant's function as condensation, expression and response to historical forces is therefore attenuated. Since he does voice much of the film's structural comment, and the film never gives a version of the catastrophe significantly different from his own statement in the dock at the beginning, he seems to be the 'hero' in a formal, functional sense. But the only character development is allotted to Major Thomas (a role for which Jack Thompson won the Best Supporting Actor award at Cannes, as well as applause from the grudging Brisbane audience): again, the tensions between formal imperatives of drama, novel and history out of which the screenplay is constructed (not to mention Morant's own ballads, letters and reports) result in confusion. The play-within-a-play structure (trial interwoven with flashbacks), by taking place largely in the narrative present, necessarily suppresses direct representation of biography and simplifies motives. But to portray the whole environment of an action, including nature and society, as stages along [the] path ... the action must be based

on retrogressive motifs' (Lukács, p. 172) — and this is precisely what the flashbacks and dreams could have done, 'reflect[ing] correctly', in the process, 'the dialectics of freedom and necessity' (Lukács, p. 172). How, then, does 'Breaker Morant's' chronology construct character, and what does it suggest about causality?

Flashbacks can potentially suggest alternative actions and consequences, interfering, for creative and critical purposes, with normally accepted concepts of time as continuous and character as stable. But 'Breaker Morant's' use of the technique is conservative, little more challenging to order and outcome than a live action replay of Lions versus Springboks. The characters (except, perhaps, Thomas) react to circumstances from a pre-determined personality base, and Morant from one major motive ('Avenge Captain Hunt'); beginning and end of the film are indissolubly linked, as its 'explanation' of events simply confirms Morant's opening statements. The story gradually takes shape for viewers, as different versions are related by mostly hostile and unreliable witnesses, but the possibility that events and persons could have developed differently is not considered. These flashbacks simply rearrange the presentation of the past; they do not question its fatality. (Time is never slowed down or speeded up in these past sequences, nor are images superimposed.) Their effect could be conceptualised by comparing the sequences of the finished film to the succession of images in a loaded slide carousel. Narrative may move forwards or backwards, but only within a set pattern. The implication is that mere chronological succession somehow explains historical consequences; the concept of causality is little more subtle than *post hoc propter hoc*. (Of course, the film's ending is known in advance — although perhaps not to most audiences — but this is no barrier to suspense or innovation, or none of the world's tales would be twice told.) The film, then, is as stacked as the court martial itself was, and the Kitchener conspiracy theme further deprives the characters of initiative or even indeterminacy. That the truth is never told and justice not done in 'a new war for a new century', set in a no man's land where 'there are no rules', nonetheless suggests that normally truth is knowable and justice definable; unreliable narrators, moreover, do not undermine the conception of narration itself as fundamentally unproblematic.

It would be an exaggeration, then, to regard Beresford's Morant as a Hegelian/Lukácsian 'world-historical individual', 'portrayed in such a way that he not only finds an immediate and complete expression for his personality in the need evoked by the collision, but also draws the general

social, historical and human inferences of the collision — without losing or weakening ... either his personality or its immediacy' (Lukács, pp. 143-4). That would require a 'pathos' and 'quality of ... passion which is neither abstractly general nor individually pathological, which enables the concentration of personality upon pathos to find a direct response among the masses' (Lukács, p. 162). Such an individual, according to Lukács, would forecast progressive tendencies of her/his time already stirring, but in fragmentary and inchoate form, among 'the people'. But the whole thrust of 'Breaker Morant' is fatalistic. At the end Morant and Handcock are hastily buried to the restrained irony of Morant's voice singing 'A Soldier of the Queen', while titles again intrude to inform us — very partially — what happened to everyone else. (Witton, released from gaol in England, wrote *Scapegoats of Empire*; Thomas retired to his country law practice in New South Wales and became a recluse.) If Beresford's intention is to confine the story to what the defeated characters themselves could have known, the apparent determinisms of character, circumstance and conspiracy are understandable. But not necessary.

For in fact the ending was more progressive than anyone could guess from the film, the closure of which reaffirms an Imperial, hierarchical, apparently immutable social order. This very war, coupled with the Irish rebellion of Easter 1916, began the end of the Empire that seems so eternal in 'Breaker Morant'. In Australia, L.M. Field's *The Forgotten War* claims that, after an initially spineless government reaction ('no less reprehensible than the bloody deeds themselves, or the callousness of Kitchener. It took the forms of a supine attitude ... towards Imperial authorities, an unseemly haste ... of the press to disown the wrong doers, and apparent public acquiescence in the executions'):<sup>16</sup>

...a process of national introspection ... had already begun. The affair of the Bushveldt Carbineers represented the greatest shock of the war to Australian complacency over the nation's military image in South Africa ... [and] disenchantment with the cult of the warrior ... [Australians] were embroiled in a war that brought no national honour ... the nation turned its back on the war, although it clearly marked the beginnings of the Anzac legend and the tentative emergence of the soldier as folk hero in place of the bushman.<sup>17</sup>

I return, then, to my contention that 'Breaker Morant' is not a film about history (if it were, the depredations of Kitchener's 'scorched earth' policy would have to appear), but one which uses history as local colour, entertainment predominating over enlightenment. Truly historical films now tend to project a critique of the very sources and processes of

documentation and narration: 'The Song of the Shirt', for instance, combines material from official British records, contemporary Victorian novels, reportage, cartoons and lithographs, and then uses montage to reveal its own procedures of reassembly and re-presentation. Its techniques are deliberately visible; 'Breaker Morant's' are so 'natural' (or 'cohesive', as Jack Thompson symptomatically described them) as to pass unnoticed. Just as it mixes elements of different story-types within a more encompassing genre, 'Breaker Morant' borrows from different modes of retelling the legend (which has always gone underground only to reappear: 'They still talk about him in the back country of the [Northern] Territory and Queensland.')

These include Morant's own ballads, sung and printed; biographies; Ross's play; and Kit Denton's instant 'classic' novel which I bought in the Australian section of Tullamarine, Melbourne's International Airport. The story, it seems, is as 'Australian' as the dried apricots, beef jerky and Kraft Cheestiks also available to the departing traveller; hence its acceptability to the Australian Film Commission, which reneged on sponsoring David Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, and hence also, one can speculate, the popularity of the jingoistic Barry Mackenzie films during the Vietnam years. Each of these modes has a specific intent and impact, and one way to historicise the film would have been to juxtapose them in their original state (with contemporary archive footage as well), so that each could highlight the stances and special pleadings inherent in the others. Again, the material is there, but because of the flawless and coherent orchestration, its critical potential is only partially exploited. Perhaps Beresford's mixing and then concealing the contradictory pull of different genres and modes is not just one man's artistic blunder, but a problem of representation characteristic of our time:

It is easy to see what ideological inhibitions work against [authentic historical drama] in modern writers. The development of capitalism inevitably alienates writers from popular life, they find it more and more difficult to see into the inner active forces of capitalist society ... [and] of all the factors which determine the complex content of life only the immediate causal connexion between two related spatial-temporal phenomena is recognised ... this alienation ... leads [modern writers] to over-rate immediate causation, which they generally and inevitably see in terms of biographical-psychological causation, and so to acquire their preference for biographical form. (Lukács, p. 376)

Perhaps I have overstressed my historically and politically concerned response to 'Breaker Morant'. Beresford's renderings of Australian myths can be more disturbing and provoking, as with 'The Getting of Wisdom' (originally a female *Bildungsroman* by an Australian woman writer, 'Henry Handel' Richardson), and his adaptations of David Williamson's biting plays 'Don's Party' and (forthcoming) 'The Club'. To attain even limited autonomy, or more — one London reviewer awarded the final sections of the screenplay 'Ibsenite' status — when subsidised by a self-conscious government, and working with commercialised cultural forms, is a significant achievement. (Yet the reception of 'Don's Party' again raises the question of whether send-ups are recognised for the social criticism they are, a problem familiar no doubt to Bosman and Pieter-Dirk Uys as well). Did the reviewer who concluded, 'Breaker Morant' deserves to be popular and successful, and will be, whether or not it touches on Australian and contemporary nerve spots as it might',<sup>12</sup> have Southern African audiences in mind? Or another who notes that 'Beresford scarcely needs to stress the modern parallels; they are distressingly obvious?'<sup>13</sup> How will all South Africans, whose media daily insult them with the evasive rhetoric of 'unrest', 'borders', and 'occupational areas', perceive the 'obvious' and feel the 'distress'? And how will 'Breaker Morant' be viewed in Mozambique and Angola?

## NOTES

1. Jack Thompson (who plays the role of Major Thomas), quoted by Peter Welch, 'Breaker - Best Thing Since Sunday', Trans-Australia Airline's in-flight magazine, distributed during August 1980, p. 29. Thompson is referring to the 'extremely strong and laconic Aussie character' of Lt. Handcock.
2. *The Bulletin* (Sydney), 23 September 1980, p. 47.
3. That is, the information available. As various writers, e.g. F.M. Cudlack in 'Breaker Morant: a Horseman Who Made History' (1962) and Kit Denson in *The Breaker* (1978) have shown, destruction or inaccessibility of War Office records adds to the mythic power of the story by ensuring that 'the whole truth' can never be known.
4. Quoted by R. Connolly, *Cinema Papers* No 28 (August-September 1980), p. 17.
5. 'Breaker Morant' combines strands from various narrative traditions. I am using 'Australian male picaresque' as a shorthand notation: this is a particularly complex



form for, as numerous cultural commentators have observed, reckless rebelliousness is usually cancelled by defeat. The producer Matt Carroll's pin-pointing (in the article referred to in note 1 above) 'A dramatic storyline about a group of men with a strong central character sharing a go- defying the system of authority' as 'the well-spring of our original success' (referring to the South Australian Film Corporation's 'Sunday Too Far Away' as a prototype of the appeal of this story-pattern) does not really clash with reviewer Jack Clancy's observation. It is striking that ten years of Australian film-making has failed to produce anything much resembling a hero figure. The gallery of defeated males, characterised at best by a sort of stoic resignation at worst by a despairing laconicism, is a long one' ('Breaker Morant', *Cinema Papers* 28, p. 283). A zig-zagging of contradictory character traits within one individual was perceived by D.H. Lawrence in Australia, and his notions have been discussed by Patrick Morgan in his paper, 'Hard Work and Idle Dissipation', delivered in Frankfurt at the March 1981 conference of the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies.

But other genres, such as 'war films' concerned with the morality/expediency of 'following orders' (such as, to give a South African example, 'The Wild Geese'), have contributed elements from their specific codes and conventions as well. To such a grouping one can also add 'The Outsider', acclaimed as the first popular-cinematic portrayal of 1970s Belfast. Its protagonist, like Harry Morant, explores the complications of a divided identity (as paraphrased from J. Dunmore Clarkson's *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, 'a religion he has not got and a politics he does not understand'), insofar as the limited horizons of a commercialised American film will permit him. The revival of romantic motifs and archetypes often occurring in frontier situations is striking in the biographies of Morant which view him in quasi-chivalrous terms: distinctions between knight, buccancer, and bandit become blurry at times. Northrop Frye (in *Anatomy of Criticism and Fables of Identity*) regards the loss of personal identity as the most terrifying ordeal in the romance archetype, and mentions the nightmarish suitability of a rigged trial to symbolise this. Frye uses the term 'kidnapped romance' for the exploitation by ascendant ideologies of romantic themes and motifs, mentioning Kipling, Haggard and Buchan. In the Morant film, elements of these old stories are retold and modified by a young nation validating its cultural competence and overcoming the famous 'cultural cringe'.

6. F.M. Cutlack, 'Breaker Morant: a Horseman Who Made History' (1962) (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1980), p. 75.
7. Isabel Hofmeyr's characterisation of the roughly contemporaneous Kimberley digger journalism — 'libellous, tendentious, partisan, humorous, satirical and iconoclastic in the extreme' ('The Mad Poets: An Analysis of an Early Sub-tradition of Johannesburg Literature and its Subsequent Developments' in Belinda Bozzoli, comp., *Labour, Townships and Protest: Studies in the social history of the Witwatersrand*, Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1979, p. 125) — could also apply to the influential *Bulletin* during the 1890s Depression and at the time of Australian Federation. Comparative studies of the Australian and South African colonies would certainly reveal many more institutional and ideological parallels.
8. Quoted by Jack Clancy, 'Breaker Morant', *Cinema Papers* No 28 (August-September 1980), p. 283.
9. Welch, 'Breaker: Best Thing Since «Sundays», p. 79.

10. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1957), trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 580. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
11. Welch, p. 29.
12. L.M. Field, *The Forgotten War. Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899-1902* (Melbourne Univ. Press, 1979), p. 173.
13. *Ibid.* I should add that the 'ending' probably hasn't happened: the revival of an imperialist-period legend during the hegemony of multi-national world capital, and its appropriation by national-popular discourse, implies that there is almost no end to the uses of this story. The problem of exploring cultural identity without promoting jingoistic nationalism is a recurrent dilemma amongst colonial and post-colonial cultural workers. In an interview with *Semper* (Brisbane, 25 September 1980, pp. 19-20), probed about the Australian film industry's spate of nostalgia films and the prominence of the Australian flag in advertisements for 'Breaker Morant', actor Jack Thompson claimed, 'I think there's a sort of nationalism associated with it, but ... Americans applaud it too, and Englishmen applaud it. The film isn't simply an Australian showpiece nor does it present the flag as the thing that's being fought for ... I think it must give the Australian people overall a greater sense of ... cultural identity. I don't know where to go from there, really. That [question] flows me, that one.' He then makes the suggestive comment that this accomplished, perhaps overpraised national film industry may have resorted to the near-past because 'It's difficult to make contemporary pieces because you always have an argument with your audience' (!); for him, 'Breaker Morant' is able to be 'a very contemporary film' precisely because it's 'not a film about the Boer War'. The rationale seems to be that film-audience Australians can only approach their conservative, still colonial, multi-national controlled present via the past.
14. Thompson in Welch, p. 29.
15. Clancy, p. 283.
16. Connolly, p. 19.

This is a revised version of a paper which originally appeared in *Critical Arts*, Johannesburg.



Trial scene from *Breaker Morant*

# Chris Wallace-Crabbe

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## LANDSCAPE WITH CLASSIC FIGURES

Four big swans,  
black arrows,  
beat up to  
Point Ricardo  
in furl-tight  
formation,  
one skein of  
cirrus drifting.

Never a  
vertical:  
unbroken  
blonds and slates  
corrode the  
retina.  
Just here and  
there, frail, tall  
the surf rods of  
Sicilian farmers.

Flaccus, your  
olives have  
blown small to  
smithereens;  
bees yawn through  
your sockets  
broodingly.  
Day thickens.

# Thomas Shapcott

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## FICUS BENJAMINII

Potted, behind a sofa in Stockholm.  
On a Toronto platform, pruned.  
*Stephan Dom*, Vienna, and *Ficus Benjaminii*  
swaying above tribute garlands, safe  
in its tub.

*Ficus Benjaminii* takes something away  
it deflects light deep into itself  
a shady undercurrent of ripples  
each leaf with its edge of ripples  
dreaming of dampness, compost, humid  
Queensland summer.

+ +

*Ficus Benjaminii* is mine.  
The original tree claims my backyard  
children growing up share figtree shade  
that foresaw their space four hundred years  
and knotted its trunk to a giant's wrist  
sinews two children cannot grip around.  
They twitch in dreams for such security  
the cubbyhouse ten feet up no sun  
a summer room of green benches beyond storms  
never drought nothing disturbing spiders  
that shall be harmless for life like the work of birds.  
At night fruitbats weave charms to net stars with  
beetles are brought blindfold chubby slaves  
that bump giggling caught in a grandfather tickle  
the fig dreaming us there

we toss above damp sheets  
and return alone, find the secrets, centuries  
knotted in those wrists plunging through compost

under the falling hair of leaves that still ripple  
like summer water when the sun slaps loud  
outside.

+ +

In my knuckles there is the remembrance of compost  
there are green shoulders of leaves where you leave a shadow.  
Stockholm, Vienna, Toronto: there are no spiders.  
Ficus Benjaminii, indoors, trimmed for tubs,  
we call it Weeping Fig in my country but that  
requires growth and so much living, building,  
experience before the right to grieve may be granted.  
You are correct to refer only to textbook botany.  
You have my birth legacy in your potplants, but only  
the rootless exile of its name.

## B. R. Whiting

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### SENSE

Dawn with a lunar light,  
Sea and sky silent,  
High tide, sand white,  
The harpooner patient —  
Seaweed waves aside  
From knife-handed crabs,  
Betrays where fish hide  
And the spearman stabs  
To disturb the shark form  
Of the boat's dark shade  
As the surface is torn  
By the splash that's made.

No word. Near the red rocks  
In the distance, loud,  
A sea-eagle shivers and shocks  
The silence, his proud  
Swooping explodes in spray,  
Then the hushed air closes —  
The leopard eyes of a great ray  
Appear — the spear lunges.  
It fights with a strong wing  
And a devil's face,  
Jabbing its long sting  
With terrible force,  
Tosses the sea white,  
Magnificent, plumed  
With spray, its last fight  
Foreseen, foredoomed  
By the fine harpoon  
That holds its prey  
And dumps it down  
On the deck to die.  
As it arches and flops  
Its torn agony  
From its pale belly pops  
A newborn stingray —  
The austerity of day recedes,  
We stoop with care,  
Smile, give him the sea he needs,  
Laugh at him there,  
A perfect small being  
Diving through the clear tide  
Of all that we were seeing  
To his future pride —

The sense of a design that has  
No sense in words,  
And yet the pattern possesses  
The flight of birds  
And the fall of the small ray  
Wavering to confirm  
Its shadow's light play  
On the sandbar form.

## THE FIRST MORNING

Gulls, cold air, morning  
Created for the first time  
Innocent of meaning  
Without man, word, system —

I saw an albatross trail his wing  
Down waves as great as this whole port,  
High as houses, walled with rain,  
The Antarctic sky storm-shot —

Nets, iridescent oily scum, hulls  
Weaving and burning for the first morning,  
The new day and the gulls new  
Until words come to blur the sign;

All there, the prehistoric light  
And again, the individual  
New and unique, conjured from the night  
To find the words worn thin and dull —

I saw the silver belly of a dolphin  
Flash in the spray,  
Cross the bows and sound  
Down and away;  
Waves ran on and remained,  
The hull heeled over to the wind,  
Down beyond words it sounded,  
A fountain contained in the mind —

The gentle images sing, the gulls  
Fulfil the air, their wings reveal  
How nearly the individual  
Contains the spell,  
Signs spelling the wordless fountain  
Music ordering forms of light  
Around the talisman  
Of things united.

The power in the sound  
Transcends the port,  
Wave and ocean, wing and wind  
In the tension of art;  
Made new again  
The cliché of dust  
Spells out the fountain,  
Writes albatross,  
The waves cry summertime Venus,  
Words quicken and combine,  
Transition, synthesis:  
Singing a rainbow from yesterday's bones.

MARK O'CONNOR

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## Vernacular and Middle Styles in Australian Poetry

It is generally recognized that there is a move at present towards the vernacular style in poetry,<sup>1</sup> and it seems obvious that this bears some relation to the increasing literary confidence and national assertiveness of the sixties and seventies, and to the upsurge in other Australian art-forms, most notably film and drama. Undoubtedly there has been a change not only in the writers but in public taste. Readership or audience that wants the home product and the local theme is one of the phenomena that connect the new drama, the new films, and much of the new poetry and the new short stories.



It is not surprising therefore that we have a movement in poetry, as in drama, that rejects the Anglophile limitations of the past and interests itself in exploring characteristically Australian resources of language as well as subject-matter. But the question remains: whether we can expect anything quite as broadly Australian and dialectal as the new drama. Hasn't that already been tried and discredited by earlier generations of poets? Poetry, after all, is not a local art in the same way as drama: if we are to achieve something in poetry comparable in originality to the new drama, it may well be the work of poets who have come to use Australian material and idiom in a more subtle and subdued way than most of the dramatists.

The odd thing is that some of the poets are having remarkable success with intonations and idioms of the sort that might be classified as broad Australian. As good a place to start as any is with Geoff Page, author of *Cassandra Paddock's* (Angus & Robertson, 1980), who combines awareness of international models with a dry grasp of popular idiom

*Don't worry says  
the one called Tiger,*

*the ph-prop at the face  
a fraction short,*

*She'll tighten up  
when the world turns over*

(*'Learning'* 1974)

Here the use of 'she' for 'it' is only the most overt feature of a passage that perfectly captures both the rhythms and the bravado of the Australian vernacular.

Page's elegant mastery of the wispy four-words-a-line style (what in lesser poets deserves to be described as the drip feeding style) suggests American influence; and in fact he can move a long way in the 'international' direction, as in his remark on the canvases in the Hall of Victories at Versailles:

*Defeat were not commissioned  
or, if they were,  
grace London or Berlin.*

*Around four walls  
La Victoire De La Patrie —  
closed circle.*

Go out  
where you came in.

(‘Closed Circle’, 1974)

But perhaps he is most at home manipulating the terse statements and flat cadences of broad Australian speech, as at the conclusion of his ‘Landing of Christ at Gallipoli’:

Seeing him wave that blood-red bayonet  
I reckoned we were glad  
To have him on the side.

If Page’s rank as a poet is not as high as his mastery of form and vernacular intonation might suggest, it may be because he lacks as yet a certain intellectual subtlety, and seems happiest (as in these examples) with large and simple ideas, like the wrongness of religious or national chauvinism. It may not be fanciful to see this defect as associated with the vernacular style. The Australian vernacular (which is a matter of intonation and choice of words rather than a dialect) is not simply an *alternative* form of the English language: it is felt even by most native speakers as a *specific* form of English, one more appropriate to some uses than to others. In this it resembles literary Scottish which becomes much more ‘braid’ on a ‘harnely’ subject than on an elevated one. (As early as the fifteenth century the Scots poets had worked out a system of stylistic levels in which the proportion of specifically Scots words fluctuated in inverse proportion to the solemnity of the theme.) There is something of the same feeling in the Australian vernacular: a certain populist contempt for more artificial and inflated modes of diction. The cover of John O’Grady’s *Aussie English* gets the feeling right, I think, with its confident Aussie knocking the English vowels for six. No doubt historically it originated in part as a deliberate rejection of the more cultivated speech of the governing class; and it retains even today a certain air of populist cheek.

The result is that the vernacular speaker who can be drily witty about taking a chance on a short pit-prop may be tongue-tied on more sensitive or less ‘virile’ issues. The problem for a major poet is to turn the cheeky deflating vernacular into a genuinely adaptable middle style in which ‘all things worth saying may be said’. This involves ignoring Barry Humphries-style comic exaggerations and listening instead for the subtle cadences of the living vernacular.

The established master of this tradition is Bruce Dawe who handles the

familiar realities of contemporary Australia with an inwardness and rhetorical delicacy that make him deservedly one of our most popular poets. His 'Life Style' dealing with the religion known as Australian Rules, is I think the only poem to have made the sporting page of the *Melbourne Age*:

... And the tides of life will be the tides of the home-team's fortunes  
— the reckless proposal after the one-point win,  
the wedding and honeymoon after the grand-final...

They will not grow old as those from more Northern Seas grow old,  
for them it will be always three quarter-time  
with the score level and the wind advantage in the final term...

For an Australian this offers much the same shock, or joy, of recognition as the new drama: a satisfaction at seeing familiar things recognized in art. In fact in a century when long-term changes in the intonation of spoken English have destroyed the traditional metres and eroded the popular audience of poetry, it is remarkable to what an extent the repeated joy of recognition in Dawe's work works like a structural substitute for metre, giving his work a popular almost balladistic feeling without detracting from its modern discursive complexity.

Not that Dawe has exorcized the element of mild larrikinism so often conveyed by the vernacular. Rather he has extended its range by a bold admixture of other styles ('Go easy, kids, here sleep your history's parents') and references ('They will not grow old ...'). In fact if there is a characteristic feature of educated Australian, as opposed to British, sensibility it may be precisely this tendency to mix levels of style without feeling the incongruity. A kind of literary democracy. Les Murray who claims that 'There is no such thing as a native Australian high style' adds that 'There is a lovely middle voice about Australian poetry at its best'.<sup>1</sup> It is probably the best sensibility and the most useful style to have in an age increasingly conscious of *process* and of the interconnectedness of all worlds: astronomical, cultural, biological, technological and moral.

Dawe extends his range too through the manipulation of various narrative personae and often of a supposedly public Australian voice:

For a while there we had 25-inch Chinese peasant families  
furnishing in comfort on the 25 inch screen...

At times he deals in such broad ironies and simple colloquial certainties that one is misled into thinking his English more Australian than in fact it is, and also into underestimating the subtleties of feeling that come from elaboration of some comic-seeming inconsistency. The progression in a Dawe poem is often from broad local comedy to subtle universal tragedy, as in the close of his foot-slogger's view of the Crucifixion ('And a Good Friday Was Had By All'):

Orders in orders, I said after it was over  
nothing personal you understand – we had a  
drill-sergeant once thought he was God but he wasn't  
a patch on you

then we hauled on the ropes  
and he rose in the hot air  
like a diver just leaving the springboard, arms spread  
so it seemed  
over the whole damned creation  
over the big men who must have had it in for him  
and the curious ones who'll watch anything if it's free  
with only the usual women caring anywhere  
and a blind man in tears.

Les Murray, unlike Dawe, does not so much mix the vernacular with more literary styles as seek to make it do duty for everything. Even his earliest work was remarkable for vivid use of a heightened natural speech:

It began at dawn with fighter planes.  
They came in off the sea and didn't rise,  
They leaped the sandbar one and one and one  
Coming so fast the crockery they shook down  
From off my shelves was spinning in the air  
When they were gone

(*'The Burning Truck'*)

In his later work this has evolved into the subtle delineation of social types and nuance:

CL the detection. After the age of belief  
we're what happened to mystery. Our model explainaway trade  
brings complex relief

Not quite your suave Sherlocks, we know  
fences, sperm, payoffs, the squator of minds, and where  
the husbands go.

(*The Police: Seven Voices*)

The comedy is much less broad than in Dawe. Indeed the vernacular is no longer comic, though it remains ironic. There is a much greater interest in abstract ideas, and the voices occasionally step out of character to point out the philosophical implications of their stance. (Murray must now rival Hope, though in a very different medium, as Australia's major poet of ideas.) Yet the most obvious stylistic quality, apart from a fine ear for idiom, is a rigorous concision. Intellectually Murray has, in common with Hope and Judith Wright, an awareness of the interconnectedness of the human and natural worlds, and of the relevance to human experience of all sorts of facts which a lesser mind might write off as specialized knowledge.

More recently he has been experimenting with the roomier format of a verse novel. The following passage shows his skill at rendering social argument in concrete terms, as well as the characteristic vernacular reliance on short un-conjoined sentences and flat ironical statements:

In that other Depression, there was some kindness,  
this one's like fellows crossing a plain  
under sniper fire. One here, one there  
goes down with his boat and colour TV  
and he's ignored. Or we're told to kick him –

Unemployment's not allowed under Socialism.

(*The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, 1979)

The tendency of Australians to think of their own idiom as, if not a patois, at least something to be abandoned when attempting to be serious or poetical is so strong that Murray's and Dawe's achievement in using it as the medium of non-comic verse is even more remarkable than the achievement of the dramatists in creating an audience that could accept the matter-of-fact use of Australian accent, settings, and reference. The drama, after all, has often chosen to mock the broader vernacular speakers for the amusement of the new university-educated classes.

Murray and Dawe are so prominent among the form poets of the present that it may be necessary to remind ourselves that their vernacular is not by any means the natural speech of all Australians. Murray's in particular is largely the language of that rural Australia which most Australians have left in this or the last two generations; and its cryptic

allusions require considerable footnoting for city dwellers. It is such a rich language that it would be a great pity if it were to fade out of use like the Roman dialect of Trilussa's poems. Yet the worldwide pattern, despite certain resurgences of regional politics, is for the diminution of dialects. And for the growth of city populations, and of international urban ways at the expense of rural ones. (Indeed Murray with his conservative attitudes to issues like population-control sometimes presents a fine picture of a man standing on his head to saw away the branch by which he is supported. It is one of the paradoxes of pioneering societies that to be a conservative, as opposed to a conservationist, is to be a supporter of the very forces that will transform that society.) It is probably true, too, that the vernacular offers less to female than to male authors.

Clearly it would be a great mistake for younger poets to follow Murray's or Dawe's vernacularism as matter of fashion rather than conviction; and no doubt it is the last thing these two poets would wish. To realize that an Australian poet's natural voice need not be vernacular, or at least not that sort of vernacular, one need only think of such names as Judith Wright, David Campbell, David Malouf or Rosemary Dobson. There are many vernaculars in Australia, and some of them have a distinctly American or British tinge. If there are many readers who will feel the joy of recognition in Dawe's "Life Style", there are many others who will find it rather in the style and sensibility of Dransfield's

wakes, bluejean morning, sound of  
rain at the window, she has gone, leaving  
what one leaves of the night before the grey feeling  
like a visual headache is not altogether  
banished by candles or flickering  
walk which enter and withdraw from seeing

(*'Geography I'*)

or in Robert Gray's international limpidity:

there glides up against me what seems  
an icy cat  
Thin as goat's milk  
the first daylight

or Bruce Beaver's Saul Bellow-like erudition:

At Surfers' Paradise were Meter Maids  
glabrous in gold bikinis

It was before your country's  
president came among us like a formidable  
virus.

(Letters to Live Poets, no 1)

The achievement of poets like Murray, Dawe and Page, therefore, is not that they have established a prescriptive style, but rather that by establishing even the broad vernacular as a literary language they have won for every Australian poet the right to seek his or her individual voice somewhere in the gamut between international English and vernacular Australian. It is the more remarkable that they should have achieved this at a time when so many of the younger poets were looking for a quick sell-out to West Coast American influence, abandoning the flexible discursive freedoms of the middle style for the jerky surreal syntax of a movement that seems in retrospect to have put its main energies into promotion rather than communication.

Yet even here we should be just. The exaggerated claims made by the late-sixties and seventies underground for often mediocre or derivative work have made them tempting comic material for anyone rehearsing the literary history of the last dozen years. At best they made the same error as the Ern Malley victims, mistaking a style of very limited popular appeal for a great-leap-forward in poetic technique. Yet some were in fact seeking in the West Coast American tradition precisely the colloquial freedom and naturalness which the Australian vernacularists have achieved. Nigel Roberts for instance penned a poetic statement (printed in the appendix of *The Applestealers*) containing an attack on university English which Les Murray might well have echoed:

where the tradition / of  
english spoken poetry / was  
still British / so  
the dead  
could be spoken to / in  
their own tongue

though he may have confused vernacularism with artistic nonchalance in opposing this to the view of those

who saw / poetry  
as a natural activity  
— as something to do / amongst  
many other things...

a poet & dealer today / a musician  
tomorrow / & a  
front row forward / Saturday

What the Australian poet needs, it is clear, is freedom to use his or her 'ain vulgaire'. It is necessary to be free not only of alien brands of English but of overseas notions of stylistic levels and of poetic and non-poetic subjects and treatments. We have a different continent to describe, and overseas rules are bound to constrict and distract us from what we want to talk about. America, for the English language, was only the New World; that is a newer Europe with much the same animals, trees, climates, and techniques of living. Australia is much more different from America and Britain than either from the other. And it is partly the existence of this great undiscovered continent's-worth of subject-matter awaiting description that recommends to us the flexible permissions of a discursive middle style rather than the more extreme stylistic fads which sometimes reflect, in the two Old Worlds, a certain exhaustion of external subject-matter. The Australian middle styles have held off the challenges of the Angry Penguins era and of the Balmain seventies, and seem at present more broadly based than ever. The problem of Australian English in the crude sense has been solved. What remains for each poet is the problem of hearing and developing his or her individual voice, whether it be what Professor Mitchell would classify as broad, educated, or cultivated Australian.

#### NOTES

- 1 See for instance Mark Macleod, 'Soundings in Middle Australian', *Meanjin* 39, 1, April 1980, pp. 103-11.
- 2 An Interview With Les Murray', *Quadrant*, December 1976, pp. 71-2.



## Survival of the Jindyworobaks

Rex Ingamells, the Jindyworobaks chief, was a teacher at Unley High School when I went there as a student in 1946. He resigned soon afterwards, leaving his legacy, a Jindyworobaks anthology of Australian verse, which produced in me an aversion to my native muse which was not completely eradicated until I discovered the poetry of Les Murray. Because of it, I failed to benefit from the courses in Australian literature given by Brian Elliott at Adelaide university, a loss which I now regret. The fault was all mine; through complacency and compliance with the prevailing fashions in culture, I lost an opportunity available to few people at the time, for whatever might be said for or against the original Jindyworobaks, they must be given credit for insisting on the value and relevance of Australian literature in a world still prone to the cultural cringe, and there could not have been many schools and universities in the forties and early fifties which tried seriously to develop an appreciation of local culture. I must admit that even with me, they did not wholly fail, for despite my youthful disrespect for many of the verses in that green and gold cloth-bound anthology, they helped to shape my image of an Australian landscape whose beauties inhere essentially in its stark barrenness and hostility to the white man, and this, I suspect, is an image shared by others of my generation, for years later, I recognized it as precisely Rob's vision of Australia in Randolph Stow's *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.

These personal reflections are not merely self-indulgent. They exemplify the persistence of certain Jindyworobaks notions, despite the negative impact and collapse of the movement itself, but it is something of which we would have remained unaware had it not been for Brian Elliott's astutely annotated collection of Jindyworobaks writings. Even the editor himself admits to being surprised at the discovery, and gives part of the credit to Les Murray, who once described himself as 'the last of the Jindy-

worobaks'. While it is true that Murray explicitly, but also half-jokingly, recognized in his own attitudes to the Australian environment a similarity to those of the original Jindyworobaks, Brian Elliott's book enables us to see that there was in the Jindyworobaks vision of Australia a truth unwittingly shared by a number of artists whose work fulfils its ideals more successfully than the verses of the acknowledged members of the movement did. The argument that their analysis of Australian culture was mistaken because it failed to inspire accomplished poetry is now seen to be false (as it always should have been, for just as the truth of its arguments is no measure of the value of a poem, so is a good poem not the test of the ideas that inspired it). Brian Elliott (with a little help from Les Murray) has demonstrated that Jindyworobaks was an idea more powerful than the group of poets who espoused it could cope with, or than anyone understood at the time. His book is therefore much more than just a well-annotated edition. It offers a redefinition of part of Australia's cultural history which enlarges our insight into the recent past and relates it to some of our current preoccupations.

In part, this is because some of the ideas which the Jindyworobaks struggled to express, or embody in their poetry, are now generally accepted, or at least seriously entertained. For example, they were conservationists who denounced in their verse, as well as in their polemical writings, the ecological damage wrought by white men in taking possession of the country, and they detected specious elements in that cluster of ideas and attitudes which came to be called 'the Australian Legend'. In both, they foreshadowed the themes of many recent poems and novels, plays and films. But beyond this, they diagnosed the cultural problem which developed out of European colonization in terms which are now unexceptional, not just in Australia but wherever an attempt has been made to transplant European culture. It was clearly re-stated recently by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood in a *Meanjin* interview:

...probably what Canada and Australia have in common [is] that they have had a physical environment which has been out of synch, with their cultural environment, because their cultural environment has come from elsewhere.

This is precisely the problem which the Jindyworobaks detected and tried to resolve through an art which respected 'environmental values'. Brian Elliott, writing with an insider's understanding of the movement summarized the programme in *The Landscape of Australian Poetry*:

We are sick in our minds because we are out of key with our environment ... the rest follows from the poet's efforts to establish a harmony.

The concept of *environmental values* which Ingamells developed as the basis of the whole Jindyworobaks effort rested on the perfectly accurate observation that Australians have an ambivalent heritage, and any venture in Australian culture had to recognize this and try to connect its two sides. This is exactly how Ingamells meant the word *jindyworobak* (which he glossed 'to join') to be understood. It denoted a programme which aimed to join the heritage Australians derived from Europe with their experience in an utterly different antipodean world, to create an authentically Australian culture. It did not (pace critics like A.D. Hope) advocate the denial of one side of this ambivalence for the sake of the other. The Jindyworobaks believed (as Brian Elliott understood) that this was not an option for Australian culture, but a necessity, since a failure to recognize and reconcile the disjunctive sides of the colonial inheritance entailed psychic, social and political disorientation, as well as cultural impotence.

Viewed in the light of current thought about the impact of colonization in the New World, these ideas would be generally endorsed, or at least seriously considered. They certainly underly some of the exciting and original literature and films recently produced in places like Australia and Canada. Yet a generation ago, when advocated by a group of young poets centred around Adelaide, they were denounced on all sides, and failed to inspire any outstandingly original creative work, at least by their exponents.

The failure was partly one of talent. Rex Ingamells, the founder and theorist of Jindyworobaks, had certain misgivings about his own talent, as a letter he wrote to Flexmore Hudson in 1941 (printed in this collection) reveals. Even at their best, it must be admitted, the Jindyworobaks never accomplished work as fine as Margaret Arwood's *Surfacing* or Les Murray's *Bukadelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle*. Moreover, it could be argued that at the same time the Jindyworobaks were expounding their theories, there were artists producing fine work which revealed similar perceptions about the Australian experience, though they had no connection with the Jindyworobaks, who either remained unaware of them, or failed to appreciate their achievements. This is obviously the case with painting in the forties and fifties, not just in the self-conscious ventures of Rex Batterbee and the group of aboriginal painters around Albert Namatjira, with which he was associated, but more creatively in the landscapes of Nolan, Drysdale, David and Arthur Boyd. It is also

evident in music like John Antill's *Coroboree* and in the jazz of the painter and musician Dave Dalwitz, who was working in Adelaide at the same time as Rex Ingamells.

These were some of the successes of the years when the Jindyworobaks were active. There were others, but it is difficult to point to literary examples, especially in poetry. The modest talents of Ingamells and his group were not fostered through fellowship with artists making similar discoveries in other fields. Nor did they flourish through association in the movement. Rather, they were crushed by the criticism which their movement provoked on all sides. They were denounced by some genuinely committed to the cause of preserving a respect for aboriginal culture, like F.J. Letters, whose lively comments are printed in Brian Elliott's collection, and conversely by others like F.T. Macartney who proved, on the basis of pure intuition, the fundamental inferiority of aboriginal culture, and confidently dismissed the Jindyworobaks in the same breath as the cultural anthropologists Harney, Elkin and Strehlow. They were attacked by those who maintained the essential European traditions of culture in Australia and on the other hand by those committed to a different, and incompatible, view of the Australian tradition.

Brian Elliott has provided a good selection of the hostile criticism in his book, and this demonstrates a point already noticed by Humphrey McQueen — that the Jindyworobaks were working in a climate of ignorance. Much of what was said against them was simply wrong or uncomprehending. This is certainly true of the line of attack which was probably the most damaging, exemplified by A.D. Hope's scathing review in *Southerly* in 1941. The Jindyworobaks, he argued, made their first mistake in continuing to see Australia untouched by the white man:

They call this the real Australia and they see the Australia we have made as an artificial and fictitious thing.

But the mistake here is all A.D. Hope's and it is hard not to see it as a wilful distortion of the Jindyworobaks position. The Jindyworobaks, like all Australian poets of their time, and even most writing now, could envisage a virgin Australia, and perhaps actually discover regions where it survived, but they were only too acutely aware of how the white man had touched it. The result in their eyes was neither artificial nor fictitious, but really destructive, leading to the extinction of the environment in which Australians of all colours had their being. This perception followed from the fundamental Jindyworobak tenet, that a vision which

joined the European heritage with the environmental experience of Australians revealed the true reality of their condition. Neither A.D. Hope, nor any other critics at the time, seemed to understand this idea or its implications, and hence they falsely imputed to the Jindyworobaks the notion that they were trying to assimilate Australian culture, and especially Australian poetry, to Aboriginal culture. This mistaken idea persisted until the present day, and together with the limited success of their verse, was the reason for their banishment.

The attack along these lines, though successful, is ultimately trivial, because it is based on error. Much more interesting was the hostility which Jindyworobak provoked from those who continued to uphold the Lawson-Furphy tradition, by the thirties and early forties still the orthodox but already the most tedious strain in Australian literary culture. There is evidence in Brian Elliott's collection which suggests that Rex Ingamells tried to stir this up, by the unduly hostile attitude which he adopted to the *Bulletin's* Red Page, and its editor, Douglas Stewart. It is easy to see why. The image of Australia which crystallized in the nineties, and was to be described in books like Palmer's *Legend of the Nineties* and Ward's *Australian Legend* was quickly penetrated by the Jindyworobaks as a delusive version of the Australian experience, and they wanted to reject it in favour of their own which represented the matter more truly. Strangely enough, Russel Ward, who actually contributed to the first Jindyworobak anthology a sonnet, cruelly exhumed by Brian Elliott, on shooting a kangaroo, paid no attention to the Jindyworobak criticism in his study of the Australian image.

One explanation for the Jindyworobak formulation of a programme to supplant the Lawson-Furphy tradition is largely overlooked by Brian Elliott, perhaps because he is so much part of it himself. He explores the historical dimension of the movement, suggesting that it was a response to the international and political pressures of the thirties, but he does not say enough about the extent to which it was a regional phenomenon. Of course, the so-called 'Australian' legend is also a regional phenomenon, which emerged in that eastern region of the country which was originally New South Wales, and South Australians were never able to relate to it sincerely. They had no convict heritage, no gold rush, few Irish settlers, no heroic bushrangers and a system of colonization which favoured the selector and therefore did not generate a powerful squattocracy or a large, nomadic, pastoral working class. The white Australian legend entered into South Australia only as an infection from the east. The vision which South Australians had of their country, at least at the time

the Jindyworobaks were active, when the states were a lot more isolated from each other than they are now, was shaped by the distinct history and geography of the region. Adelaide then was still a very small city, functionally more like a country town, not socially and environmentally divorced from the surrounding countryside, but still integrated with it through a network of commercial, social, family and cultural connections. A short journey by road or rail north or east of the state capital led into regions of semi-desert, and Adelaide was then, in the imagination of its citizens, and in fact, because of the railway, the gateway to the arid heart of the continent. These were prominent features in the South Australian's image of his world; they were the actual conditions of existence in Rex Ingamells' birthplace of Orroroo, a railway town at the edge of the settled districts, adjacent to Goyder's line, which separates the temperate coastal region from the eighty per cent of the state which experiences a desert climate and an erratic growing season. The theory of 'environmental values' which Ingamells formulated was therefore the natural result of his own environment and the impact it had upon his imagination.

In keeping then with their environmental experience and the theory which Ingamells developed, the Jindyworobaks dismissed certain aspects of the legendary Australia, in verses like Ingamells' own *Unknown Land, Australia* and *The Gangrened People* and put forward an alternative, more comprehensive vision of the country. The best expression of the rejection, as well as the Jindyworobak alternative, is Ian Mudie's poem *The Australian Dream*. It is important to recognize, in this piece, as in other writings by Ingamells and Mudie, that the received Australian legend was not rejected because it was limited in its application, and failed to account for their own perceptions as South Australians, but because it was false and delusory in the image it presented of Australia altogether, through refusing to include the inevitable dark side of the picture, as it is revealed in the destruction of Aboriginal culture and the natural environment (amongst other things). The Jindyworobak vision was therefore not a mere option: it was offered as a truer and more comprehensive account of the Australian experience, which included the legends associated with white settlement, but placed them in a broader context which revealed their ambivalence. Thus, Mudie's myth, in *The Australian Dream*, includes the land and the Aborigines, but also the pioneers, with emphasis on their negative impact on the country, the explorers, Eureka, and 'you brave wild Kelly's'. Altogether, it really is nearer the truth than the vision captured in the received legend of Australia at the time.

The Jindyworobak vision, then, shifted the emphasis in Australian history back to geological ages, reducing the role of white settlement, and advancing the importance of the aboriginal occupation of the country. Fundamentally, however, the Jindyworobak Australia is essentially geological, geographical, topographical and climatic, unpeopled by settlers, drovers, bushrangers, shearers and the like. As Ian Mudie put it in a comment in the *Jindyworobak Review*, extracted in Brian Elliott's collection:

The poets found their original inspiration for the birth of a truly national poetry in the spirit-centres of the lonely and unspoiled Centre, where the land had not been completely raped, nor the Aboriginal occupation of the land been totally degraded to the level of the whites. . . .

Despite the failure of the Jindyworobaks as a movement and the temporary triumph of the critics who misconstrued their aims, the relocation of emphases in Australian culture which these poets advocated has been quietly accomplished in the quarter-century since Ingamells' death, as novels and films like *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* and *The Last Wave* illustrate. The virtue of Brian Elliott's edition is its revelation that Jindyworobak was a focus of true perceptions about Australian culture which survived the death of the movement and continued unobtrusively in the work of many artists, including the fiction of Randolph Stow and Thomas Keneally, in compositions like Peter Sculthorpe's *Sun Music* and George Dreyfus's *Sextet for didjeridu and wind instruments*, and pre-eminently in the poetry of Les Murray, whose work finally vindicates the Jindyworobak idea.

Les Murray may be the last of the Jindyworobaks because their ideas have become so widely accepted they need never be re-stated. He is certainly a major poet because of the way his work reveals the underlying value in a movement we all thought was dead, and thus re-orientates the Australian tradition. He has kept the inescapable ambivalence of the Australian experience steadily in view, and has therefore been able to speak more directly and unaffectedly than any Australian poet before him. This is the basic source of strength in his sure-footed poetic idiom which joins a recognition of the cultural implications (for a white poet) of using English, with an unclouded sense of the Australian environment, in just the way the Jindyworobaks advocated. One reason for Murray's success and the Jindyworobaks' failure, as poets, is that whereas they could not transcend their anger at the destruction wrought by white settlement, Murray found an orientation to the Australian past, and a

poetic voice, which actually achieves a harmony, and can celebrate the Australian condition without denying its dark side.

With this new anthology we can trace the outlines of the tradition which Murray's work re-focusses. It is a splendid addition to the sequence of books with which Brian Elliott has displayed the qualities of Australian literature, and the last and best outcome of the original Jindyworobak inspiration.



# David Ireland

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## INTERVIEW

Mark MacLeod interviewed David Ireland at Macquarie University in October 1980.

*David, are characters the starting point for your writing?*

No. Well I suppose in *The Chantic Bird* I really started with the incidents that I want to use to make the book come out the shape I've planned, and then I get the characters to fit them.

*Well, the incidents are stronger than the characters in that book, but then in *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* would you have started with the characters there...*

No; the main incident was the growth of the cracking plant. That's really the main character. And I drew on the people that I knew and the sorts of people that are around an oil refinery because they're necessary furniture for the thing. The refinery was the main thing. I could have had quite different people although the spread of people round a refinery is really much the same anywhere. A new friend swore — and he'd been a chemical engineer at Caltex — he swore it was about A.O.R. refinery because the fuckups were the same, the delays, finding bits of rock in the pipes, slapdash construction. It was All the same.

When I was 16 and first went to work, I wanted to write a book some day about work. I didn't think of a factory or an industry and I certainly didn't think of a petrol refinery, but when it came, that was it. And when the refinery came I really just fitted the characters into it, once I had the incidents and the growth of that plant. I didn't think of the destruction of it. So there were 20 years between the idea and the writing of it.

My first full time work was for S.T.C. They manufactured radios, radio valves, and I was so disappointed at being at work with all my



David Ireland won the Miles Franklin award for the third time with his novel, *A Woman at the Window* (Allen Lane). The award, one of Australia's most prestigious, was established under the will of the writer Stella Miles Franklin and is given annually for a novel "which must present Australian life, in any of its phases". (Photo: News Ltd)

friends still at school, I thought I'll write about this, because it's so awful. And that feeling persisted through all the jobs I've ever had: the waste, the stupidity, the inefficiency.

But I don't want to push any ideological angle. If I'm close enough to my objects and my incidents and the soil out of which I grow I don't need to think about it. Of course I do think during the construction of the book, but I'm frightened of getting too close to any wider frame of reference in case I push the material one way or another. It's my own feelings, my own reactions and the material working in me and I feel if I'm close enough to it, the meanings will arise out. Someone said in a review once 'in the astringent Lawson tradition'. I've never read Lawson. I don't know about the tradition. If I'm close enough to what I'm doing, really getting it, sure, I'll be in the tradition because this is the same soil, only 50 years on.

*Well I'm wondering if this is the key to one of the big differences between the Prisoner and The Glass Canoe on the one hand, and A Woman of the Future on the other. You seem to have moved towards a more conscious complexity, more conscious of its levels of ambiguity. In the Prisoner the subtleties do seem to, as you say, arise out of the book, less consciously. A Woman of the Future and City of Women seem more playful*

I think you're right there... I didn't feel it at the time, but looking back, yes.

*You value the closeness of your novels to your feelings about what you see. Have you ever been able to take a whole character from life?*

I've never done that yet. The Samurai was a complex of two people I knew, plus some of me. No, I'm scared of that. And in all my novels, I try to pitch things just that little bit ahead because I've got this horrible fear with publishing delays and so on putting things back by 18 months, that it's going to be out of date, and I so much want a person picking the novel up to feel NOW. I know that with some of the things in *The Chantic Bird* or *The Fleasheaters* you can't help feeling it's a few years ago. Perhaps the currency, weights and measures, some phrase about a mile or a yard. At the time I knew those things were going to change, and I tried to put them ahead, but I'm not sure. Some might have slipped through there. I try not to have events that will date the book too much.

That problem's really caught me right now. This book in which the

person's 81. The first problem was: what? To do it with this the middle of his life so you've got 40 there and 40 there? I've finally come round, if I can, to doing the story as if it's gone through many people's mouths over a number of years and we're looking back on the 20th century without too much obvious mucking around with historical events. I want to get away from the present day 1980, so that someone reading the book in 20 years' time won't be conscious of 1980, or the Depression or the war, or Korea or anything like that. I can see the value of looking back at a book and saying Ah, the 'thirties. I can see the value of it, but I don't want it.

*Well, one of the lines that struck me in City of Women was where the narrator says 'the old order was male and sterile'. As a writer you've made your mark with many of your readers, especially with The Glass Canoe and The Unknown Industrial Prisoner, as somebody who has gone further in exploring male mythology in Australian fiction than anybody else. Further than Lawson: his range is narrower.*

*Did it seem to you with A Woman of the Future and now City of Women that you were finished with writing about men for a while?*

No. That comes about because of a gradual change in me I think, this growing dissatisfaction with the male lot, which is to a great extent separate from say the intellectual life or the life of arts represented often enough by females. I came across it in my own personal life and I didn't know what to do with it; I didn't know what to think about it. Just as I still haven't worked out my attitudes about war, about prisoners and warders ... and police. And both those things have been socked home to me pretty heavily in the last few weeks. One, by the film *Stir* and last night by an exhibition of paintings on war and peace.

*And you think of those as being part of the male principle?*

Yes. I don't mean to say that if women were concerned with it they wouldn't have armaments just as effective. Up to now they've been to one side and those things have barrelled on by themselves without any help from women. I know that in women's prisons the same sorts of people get the power amongst the prisoners; the warders are similar, I believe. It's still worrying me and I haven't got any answers to it and it worried me in my own personal contact with the people I habitually met, even though those people were from a pretty wide spectrum. Law people and public servants over in the city pubs I go to and actors and other sorts of people down in others. And knockabout people in others.

*Those people male?*

Oh yes all, just about all male, and when the females were there the females were silenced or they stood back and let the males talk; or if they were talkative the males abandoned them. I found that I could no longer talk with the people that I was thrown amongst.

*With A Woman of the Future can you remember a specific moment where you said 'Yes that's what I'll do' or was it something you intended to do all along?*

I intended to do it actually, but I came to it only through something very trivial. I came across a couple of references from vaguely literary people to the effect that Australian male writers didn't seem to be capable of writing convincingly about female characters. And after I'd seen that about twice or three times, I thought this is getting on my works. If one's a writer it's all one, and one must be able to write about a woman. So that's what I'll do next. And I thought about the parts of Australia that I would write about if I wrote about a female and then the two things started to grow tendrils towards each other and then the thing was obviously about the country: about Australia.

*And in City of Women, a book in some ways like The Glass Canoe where you take individual character studies: in the process of writing those has it ever been that you based the story on a male and simply reversed it?*

Oh... most of them, I think.

*That's really interesting, because what comes across right from The Chanick Bird is some concern with androgyny. The relationship between Peterson in the narrative is an interesting beginning to that and in this new book those neat confusions between Bobbie and Billie and those phrases where you talk about the girls being 'good guys' and so on...*

Well, don't forget I hear girls talking about other girls as 'guys'.

*As 'guys'? Really?*

Oh, yes: 'She's a good guy.' I've seen it written in American books but I've heard it more recently here in Sydney. Rather rough girls, it's true...

*Is that theme something you've noticed and been interested in in Australian society or is it a projection of the often talked about androgyny of the artist — as you were saying before, the need to be able to write male and female?*

It may have elements of both those, but I think the main spring is in me. And I've always felt about human beings that they're always running to either this extreme or that and they want you to believe this or that and right from the time I was a child I thought, in respect of manners, one's attitude, women were over there and men were here and it seemed to me that was quite wrong: they were intertwined. Now, you'd see more of the female; and then more of the male. Males and females partook so much in common of human nature that the great division between them seemed quite wrong. I didn't go into it in the sense of preaching in the book but it's the sort of thing I have in mind privately in sympathising with Althea, when she says 'Nothing is as they told me'. I guess I'm preaching that, but only in a very oblique way.

*Yes, but at a surface level I'd imagine that to many of your readers, four of your major books seem to split up almost as they say an Australian party does: men up one end and women down the other.*

Mm — but again you've introduced another thing that I'm a bit against. That is you've said 'Australian'. If you go to an Italian party the men'll be up that end and the women talking down there.

*You've picked the right one of course to compare. I wonder if it's true elsewhere.*

Well it depends where it is. In outer suburban New York at a barbecue you haven't got them mixing so well that the grown up boys ... the men ... talking football are mixing with the ladies who're talking about the patterns in *Vogue*. You notice I'm selecting the examples.

*Yet Americans are often the first to revolt against the male/female polarisation they see in Australian society and say 'Well this wouldn't happen in the States...'*

I guess I'm being selective there because I think one's perception of one's own social stratum has a big effect. And the Italians I'm thinking of are of the same stratum as the Australians I'm thinking of.

*Does it have anything to do with the supposed unfriendliness of Australian society to the creative person. Back in Lawson, to take Joe Wilson's Courtship', in the first paragraph Joe Wilson says 'I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake and grew up to be a Bushman, and didn't know what was the matter with me — or the world.' Do you remember feeling that? In all the books, for the narrator figure there's a strong sense of isolation.*

That's a very strong thing. I'm writing about it in this present book. I think I was given this by my mother... and the fact that I was born into a minor religious sect. Didn't bother me in the least, but I went to a number of different schools and that meant that I didn't have a life like my kids have got. They'll have been with at least some of their confrères through primary and all through to high school and they're now looking forward rather sadly, to leaving them next year. But I've had a history of leaving and not being close to anybody.

*Because your own family was on the move.*

Because of that and also because my own temperament took to it. I had to. Otherwise there'd be some grating and conflict — and to get out of that I changed.

*When you were at school did your friends know that you wrote and if they did, did that make a difference in their attitudes to you?*

Oh no. No, I wouldn't discuss anything like that with the kids I knocked around with. I didn't actually try to write till I left school. I left school early. No, I was always a singer and a drawer and a painter in the different schools I went to. I didn't mind people seeing my productions in these things, but not with this... Because I felt within myself that it would be many years before I could write anything acceptable to me and it didn't seem anything more than bullshit to be surrounded by people with much the same abilities as I had who therefore would admire things that were much the same as what they were producing. I wanted to be different and much much better at it.

*And in this isolated position that comes out in The Glass Canoe, City of Women, A Woman of the Future, given that you seem often to be documenting a vision of a society and a very broad one, has that meant they haven't let you into some of the mysteries? How much of Sibley is there in you?*

Well I didn't take Sibley personally. I had to invent Sibley, as I invented Alky Jack, to make less pointed the first person narrator's position. Here's a person coming in, although he was brought up in the district and therefore not really a stranger to the tribe. If I've got this person Meat constantly probing and analysing, he's more or less doing Sibley's work.

So in order to take the heat off him I created Sibley. *He's* got to make the sacrifice. And Alky Jack's got to take the more pointed of his reflections on life. And Meat has got to pretend only to be giving him an ear out of sheer decency. Otherwise if I didn't have these two characters I'd have this guy being a turd! It's like me — to the people I used to get around amongst in order to get some company, I wouldn't mention anything of my private interests. But I would be as knowledgeable about *their* things as I could be: Sport or whatever it is that they were interested in.

*Christina Stead has said that people tell writers everything, that they're falling over themselves to tell you bizarre stories because you're recording them. Does that happen to you in these pubs, or in other places?*

Yes. But you've got to treat it with a very suspicious eye. If people know you're a writer they give you all sorts of things that are useless. Whereas if they don't know you're a writer, but just that you're a sympathetic presence, they tell you lots of things without knowing it. If you don't ask questions you're hardly suspected — and of course you've got no tools round you. .

*And of course, that's Meat Man's advantage, isn't it? The reason that he's allowed to know so much of what goes on is that he's not ostensibly there to set it all down, as Sibley is.*

Mm. In the football team he's a hanger-on more or less, with the bigger boys.

*This sense of isolation goes right back to The Chantic Bird, with the hidey hole up in the roof, with the 16 ¾ year old looking at all the action, and yet not entirely part of the action.*

I realise this can be sheeted home to me to a large extent, but there's another reason for it. In *The Glass Canoe*, to get the pub up as a little citadel and increase the sense of the isolation of the people from the rest



of society, in this little eddy, I've cut their laterals that connect most of them with their parents, their friends and their relatives. There must be some days in real life when those guys are simply not there — they're on holidays with the family or with some friends out fishing and they've got all sorts of clubs they belong to at work. It's not as bleak really — I've falsified it to get them all together in their little temple.

*Yes, but whereas the other drinkers talk to Meat Man in The Glass Canoe, there's very little interchange in The City of Women between Billie and the other characters. She's all the time addressing Bobbie; but of course Bobbie never answers. So it's closest to the narrator in The Chantic Bird isn't it? There aren't the answers. You got a sense of somebody moving through a world, being part of it and yet not.*

But when you get to the end of *City of Women* and you see that what you've been told is wrong, that the city's just normal, and that the city of women is what *she* sees, this lack of her going out to them reinforces the feeling that *she* is strange; this girl cut off, growing up and not ever wanting to let go. Her voice is almost schooled and she's just describing things. Her life is all inside her.

*She finds solace in words, the manipulation of language is very clever for a chapter or so — but did you tire of her doing that? Because she doesn't keep doing it with such frequency throughout the book. Did you find that an unattractive aspect of her character?*

I don't know why I dropped it, I can't say that I tired of it. But I think I thought that it was mucking up the stories and that they were stories as they were. The piece about Mouse is in the third person — and any quotation marks is what someone else said, and I felt that that was much better that way. She's only talking about these people that she's *alleged* to get around amongst.

*So it's less her self-consciousness that's the centre of interest as the novel goes on...*

Yes, that's right: less.

*Can you tell me about leopards?*

*Leopards?* I don't know a thing about them.

*Oh yes, you do. I'm thinking here of A Woman of the Future and the lament of one reviewer that in an otherwise uncompromisingly Australian novel, you've chosen such an un-Australian animal as the central image. Do leopards have particular associations for you?*

I wanted something that was a convincingly large animal and there are none in this country. And as a matter of fact, I wanted something in Australia, something absolutely strange and a reminder of all that this country isn't. An image as violently different as a leopard is from our tame little animals was necessary for the image of Alethea's change: a change that could not have been predicted from what you can see around us here in the country. Something exotic, that doesn't have vices and stupidities attached to it. The lion has a bad name and it's a symbol of other things in the past. And the panther has a name for subterfuge and stealth and springing out. But the leopard is a real hunter and a real climber and is very smart.

*Particularly female?*

Well, there's no gross difference between male and female leopard as there is between male and female lion. And no gross difference between their hunting habits as far as I know, whereas there is with the lion.

*Which takes us back to androgyny. You've given the characters in City of Women androgynous names Billie and Bobbie, and you've played round with that. Any associations with Dionysos?*

No. Not to me.

*O.K. I give up! Can you remember the first thing you wrote?*

Well I got them together and threw them away some years ago. The first few were highly derivative. I remember some stupid thing clogged up with adjectives. Perhaps I was about 15 or so.

*Prose?*

No, verse. But I don't remember beyond the first line so don't make anything out of it! I think 'Low sullen clouds, grey with grief and pain'. I'm damned if I can remember the second line. I think it had about 12 lines.

*Did you read a lot then?*

Well, I had the impression I did, but I find now there's so many things I haven't read I don't know *what* I was doing all the time. I read a lot of poetry then.

*Still?*

Nup. No, I find it's impossible to keep up. I read it at random in magazines.

*You're working on a novel now: you don't consciously stop reading other novels?*

No — I simply haven't got time. I keep up with a certain minimum for my own information. But I find that I don't *like* to surrender myself to a novel.

*And yet you write the bloody things! ...*

Yes — other people can surrender. I find I can look at parts of what the writer's doing with the language and that's my interest in it. Because I'm not affected by other people's subject matter — not any more. Originally I read as much as I could to see what other people had written *about* as well as how they'd written it, so that I wouldn't duplicate it. I didn't base my *Chantic Bird* on Salinger and it was many years before I'd read Burgess. I wanted to be quite different.

*You don't go to the novel for what it says about life, then.*

I don't, no. I think one of the chief values of novels is — well it's all very well to talk about the novel as the way someone sees the world, but in a very real sense this *is* the world. Lots of people are writing from the world and it's fair dinkum stuff straight off the street. I'm not that sort of novelist. I want to give it an eccentric, off-to-the-margin view, perhaps an angle people haven't thought of.

*And do you regard a novel as a vehicle for exploring that angle? You said earlier that you're not a preaching novelist, that you don't have a preconceived set of notions about life that you use the novel to put forward.*

Well, to some extent I'm actually exploring it for myself. But as well there are pet ideas of my own that constantly go in.

*What's the most important one to you?*

I'd have to read some of those things! No. One of the most important is to remind people that other people exist.

*This business of the community and the tribe is really important in your writing, isn't it? In City of Women the narrator says the problem with men is they can't form communities. Did you find out in writing these last two books that's also true of females?*

It's not so much males or females, but the way your outside life's organised. But I still think it's part of the way males have grown that they're more inclined to stand everyone off and do something they want to, irrespective of anyone else's well-being. Women stand for co-operation because of traditional roles, but I fear that given the same opportunities... Well, I'm really manipulating old-fashioned ideas.

SVEN POULSEN

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## African History: from a European to an African point of view

Basil Davidson's book *Old Africa Rediscovered* (1959) was the first major survey of African history before the arrival of the Europeans. Shortly before her death in 1962 Karen Blixen wrote in her preface to the Danish edition: 'A wonderful book. I have waited for it and longed for it since I

first and before the First World War set foot on African soil.' It had strengthened her conviction that the artist — not the politician, the scientist or the businessman — must be the best intermediary between Africa and Europe.

As journalist, author and amateur-historian Davidson has been a pioneer in working for a better European understanding of Africa. Professor Roland Oliver, for a long time the leading expert on African history, points out that as a historian 'Davidson commands his sources. If he assesses them too admirably for some tastes he also rights an old imbalance.'

This imbalance was certainly serious. As late as 1963 the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper went on record as saying: 'Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.'<sup>2</sup> Trevor-Roper underestimated a new development, which had begun a few years earlier. But in a way he was right.

About 1960 there existed hundreds of works on African history. With few exceptions they were euro-centric and described mainly what the Europeans did in Africa. In their assessment of African culture they often reflected a European inability to judge any culture except in terms of their own. Technologically backward, without written language and most of them living in societies which seemed to a cursory inspection not to be regulated by law and order, Africans were generally considered as savages.

During most of the five centuries in which Europeans had contact with Africans European misconceptions about Africa were carefully nurtured to further European economic and political interests. First the slave trade, then — from about 1880 — colonial imperialism. The years between was the period of the western travellers through Africa. They were called 'explorers' although they depended wholly on the guidance of Africans or Arabs, followed oft-tramped paths and were helped immensely in their discoveries of waterfalls, rivers and lakes by Africans living many weeks' journey from these places. Confronted with the realities of African societies explorers like Heinrich Barth, Gustav Nachtigall, Livingstone, and even Stanley corrected some misconceptions and described some of the African states and trading centres they encountered as wealthy and well-ordered. The explorers relied wholly on Africans for survival, but they could, as Africans usually could not, place their discoveries in a larger context, thus providing a correct map of Africa.

The explorers' books might well have been an inducement for European historians to try to lift the darkness which shrouded the continent's past. After all, because of improved historical criticism, more attention given to economic causes and the development of a number of auxiliary sciences, European historical research in the nineteenth century took major steps towards a scientific assessment of the past. But in the hectic atmosphere of the European scramble for Africa and colonial imperialism the misconceptions inherited from the period of the slave trade survived easily. Africans were savages and if they were to be studied it must be a task for the anthropologists. This meant that European historians were at least one and perhaps two generations behind the anthropologists in giving serious attention to Africa.

Anthropologists such as C.G. Seligman and Leo Frobenius did a good deal of pioneering work in Africa. There were however a number of things they could not explain without introducing new and misleading myths about the African past. They were apt to attribute the great achievements of Africa to light-skinned outsiders who came down from the north. According to Seligman these 'Hamites' entered Africa in a long succession of waves: '...the incoming Hamites were pastoral «Europeans» ... better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural negroes.'<sup>2</sup> In the view of the anthropologists the states of West Africa, Uganda and as far south as the Zulus of South Africa were the creation of conquering Hamitic pastoralists. Unable to connect for instance the stone buildings of Zimbabwe and the Benin bronzes with the notion of a primitive Africa, they looked for the influence of outsiders. Frobenius suggested that Benin's art might be descended from the lost continent of Atlantis.

Gradually the Hamitic myth was questioned and broken down. But it was not until the 1960s that the linguist Joseph Greenberg's demolition of Seligman was generally accepted. Greenberg refuted the linguistic analysis on which the grouping of 'Hamitic' languages was based and pointed out the negative correlation between Hamitic languages and pastoralism in West Africa. There is not the slightest evidence that light-skinned Africans are quicker-witted than the darker Africans. The lighter-skinned probably entered East Africa from Ethiopia and spoke languages of the same family as Hebrew and Arab (Afro-Asiatic). Recent studies show that semitic languages have been spoken in Ethiopia for at least four thousand years.

How incomplete and misleading the written history of for instance Ghana was, I experienced ten years ago. Having been commissioned to

write a short story of the Ashantis (or Asante) for use in schools I found I had to piece much of the story together from a number of articles in various periodicals.

Asante in the nineteenth century fought seven wars with the British, who had their headquarters on Cape Coast fort. Consequently Asante and the Gold Coast attracted the attention of British historians at an early stage. Working my way through the main work on the subject, *A History of The Gold Coast and Ashanti* by W.W. Claridge, published 1915, I found that Claridge seemed to know nothing about either the Golden Stool and its symbolic value or about its creator, the priest/politician Okomfo Anokye. Most of Claridge's work, over 1,000 pages, deals with the British Expansion on the Gold Coast, which took place in the nineteenth century. W.E.F. Ward, who published a book on Gold Coast history in 1948, mainly followed in the footsteps of Claridge. The few new books presenting a less euro-centric point of view dealt with Ghana after about 1885.

Thomas Bowdich, who entered the imposing Asante capital of Kumasi in 1817 as the secretary of a British trading company, wrote a book, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, published 1819 and republished in facsimile with an introduction by Ward in 1966. In his long introduction Ward used all the space to explain why Bowdich, who left Cape Coast with the mission as scientific officer but during its stay in Kumasi took charge of it and secured the recall of his chief, was not justified in doing so. About Bowdich as an author Ward wrote that 'our first impression is that his book is little more than a jumble of superficial information, much of it of little interest to the modern reader'. In fact Bowdich's book is among the most quoted in modern works about pre-colonial Africa. After 58 pages of descriptions of Europeans intriguing against each other in Kumasi, Ward used five lines to recognize that 'Bowdich's quarrel now seems to be of very little importance and that what is valuable to us is Bowdich's vivid description of the Ashanti kingdom at the height of its power'.

In 1966, when Ward, a typical euro-centric specialist in African history, thus admitted that much of what the Europeans did in Africa now seemed of little importance, the Ghanaian historian, Professor A. Boahen criticized the historiography of Ghana. The European historians had treated the development before the arrival of the Europeans about 1500 quite wrongly, the following centuries only form an European point of view, especially the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while the expansion of Asante power in the eighteenth century

to a certain degree had been treated correctly but with many gaps and misunderstandings.<sup>4</sup>

Bohann was one of the new generation of students who since 1945 had eagerly thrown themselves into the work of researching and re-evaluating African History. It was not only African students who found that the African past had been distorted by the Europeans. Many Europeans and Americans shared their views. Moreover the empty spaces of the African past was a challenge to the spirit of inquiry. The background was of course the liquidation of the European colonial empire in Asia, the Pan-African movement, Négritude, the insurrection in Madagascar 1947, the Algerian war of liberation, the Mau-Mau rebellion — in short the wave of African nationalism.

In 1960 — the great year of African independence — the important periodical *The Journal of African History* began to appear. The first number contained an article by the young Belgian historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina, now professor of African History at the University of Wisconsin, 'Recording the oral tradition of Bakuba', an article based on long field studies in what was then the Belgian Congo. He questioned the fundamental concept of historians that written sources are better than oral. On the whole the oral tradition is now considered valuable information for from one to two hundred years back for some — but not all — ethnic groups. In the case of the Bakuba it could be verified about 300 years back, but this is an exception.

The written sources of African history no doubt were scarce but it was found that much valuable information was hidden in administrative and mercantile archives, which had hitherto gone unheeded. The works of early Arab geographers and historians such as Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun were re-examined and found of great value. Linguistics, anthropology, archeology — including the new method of radiocarbon-dating — became indispensable especially in the research of the past of the areas, mainly stateless societies, which had never been visited by European or Arab merchants or travellers in pre colonial times.

The two first editors of *The Journal of African History*, Roland Oliver, professor of African History at the University of London, and John Fage, the University of Birmingham, in 1962 published *A Short History of Africa* which immediately became a bestseller and has appeared in several new editions since then. However, the new material uncovered soon became so overwhelming that the most important works published since then have been either surveys of the history of regions, African states or ethnic groups. The first volumes of major co-operative surveys of



East Africa were published in 1963, of South Africa 1969 and of West Africa 1971. At present two multi-volume, multi-authored reference works have begun to appear: *The General History of Africa* under the auspices of UNESCO and *The Cambridge History of Africa*.

The transition during the last quarter of a century from an European or colonial to an African point of view is only one of many logical consequences of the fact that Africa was never through the rather brief colonial period in danger of suffering the same fate as other continents. The history of Australia, the USA, Canada, and to a certain extent Latin America is mainly the history of what the white man did. The original populations of these continents were reduced to insignificant minorities. Nowhere in Africa were the Africans outnumbered, nor was their culture destroyed. In 1950 for instance the Europeans in West Africa amounted to one per thousand, in Kenya to one percent of the population.

The African point of view is on the whole simply a more objective attitude to the study of the African past than the short European experience in Africa described by Europeans. Much more attention is given to pre-colonial Africa and the impact of the colonial period is completely re-evaluated. In Nkrumah's words:

Our history needs to be written as the history of our society, not as the story of European adventurers. African society must be treated as enjoying its own integrity; its history must be a mirror of this society, and the European contact must find its place in this history only as an African experience, even a crucial one. That is to say, the European contact needs to be assessed and judged from the point of view of the principles animating African society, and from the point of view of the harmony and progress of this society.<sup>1</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Basil Davidson, *African Kingdoms*. Time-Life Books, 1967, reprinted 1975. Preface by Roland Oliver, p. 7.
2. Quoted in Ali A. Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*. Heinemann, London, 1978, p. 94.
3. C.G. Seligman, *Races of Africa*. 4th edition, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 100.
4. A. A. Boahen, *A New Look at the History of Ghana*. *African Affairs* 260, July 1964.
5. Kwame Nkrumah, *Conscientism*. Revised edition, Monthly Review Press, New York & London, 1970, p. 63.

## Head Above Water

I with avowed intent,  
To be a Pilgrim...

The lively young voices of the girls at the Methodist High School rang out. Their vibrant silvery echoes burst out of the confines of the school's Assembly Hall, only to reverberate in and among the trees in front of the school compound, and to reach as far as the grey hideous walls that separated the front of the school from the loco-yard opposite. Those grey walls and the elegant trees, all seemed to take up the rhythm of the military Methodist tune in their determination to be like the khakied uniform girls within, pilgrims, pilgrims of Christ.

Hearing those voices from outside the school, the plaintive nostalgic twinge they gave the otherwise orthodox church hymn stood out. The girls did sing in tune, their Welsh Music Mistress, Miss Davies saw to that, yet, and yet, one could tell that those voices were voices from nowhere else than Africa. Because until a few generations back the voices of their grandparents were used in musical village calls, in singing ballads and telling stories in songs, in forest calls and in enhancing the vibrating rhythm of cone-shaped talking drums. Now these girls, the modern girls of twentieth-century Africa, still possess such voices, still with the same strength, still with the same vigour, but now with that added hope and pride, the pride that they were going to be new females of the new Africa. They had been told that their position was unique in history, that they were going to be the black females that would rub shoulders with the types of Miss Davies from Wales, Miss Osborne from Scotland, Miss Verney from England, Miss Humble from Oxford, and Miss Walker from Australia, plus many many other white Missionaries who had left their different countries to come to Lagos, to teach the girls to value their own importance. There were a few black mistresses, one in the Needlework department, and another in the Domestic department, but in the late fifties their influence was still very minimal.

I was late again this morning in leaving my dormitory. I was far from being popular, too shy and too sensitive to be able to forget myself for a while. Because of this, though I craved and bled inwardly for company, yet when in company I was likely to make a fool of myself in doing or saying something wrong, and that wrong thing I would worry about, cry about, bite my nails to the point of almost eating up my fingers. So to be on the safe side I always liked to stay behind deliberately when the others had gone, so that I could read a line of Wordsworth, or a verse of Byron, or Tennyson, then make the short journey from the boarding house, through the trees, that were often still wet from the night dew, with only myself for company, taking my time and walking 'as if next year would do' as our house Mistress, Mrs Okuyemi, often reminded me.

I could deliberate, chew and repeat works of Rupert Brooke, Keats, and Shakespeare, yet I was the daughter of scantily educated parents who came right out of their innocent and yet sophisticated and exotic bush culture. They were innocent to the so-called civilized world. But in communal caring and mutual sharing, in language gestures and music making, they were unsurpassable in their sheer sophistication. But they had to leave all this, my parents, in search of this new thing that was coming from places afar. They left their village homes which had been the habitat of their ancestors so many generations back and came to the city. And there they had me, and they said that I was clever. And they said that because I won something they called scholarship, which my mother used to call 'sikokip', I was to be brought up the new way. That was why instead of being in the village and claying the mud floor of my ancestors, I had to stand there in front of this school compound feeling guilty of having illegally enjoyed Rupert Brooke, and hearing the voices of my already assembled school friends singing.

I sometimes gave the village life a good deal of thought, especially as my people made sure I never lost touch with it. I had to go through all the rituals; tribal marks on the face, clitorisation at the early age of eight to give me sexual self control as a young adult and keep me on the straight and narrow, yet I knew even then that, like my parents, I was trapped in this New Thing. But of course to me and all my friends at the Girls' High School it wasn't a New Thing any more, it was becoming a way of life. I was even then feeling like that Prisoner of Chillon, when he cried,

My very chains and I grew friends,  
So much a long communion tends  
To make us what we are — even I  
Regain'd my freedom with a sigh.

So however much I admired the village life, I knew that for sheer survival I had to make a go of the Education the school was offering me free, when almost all the girls in the school were paying. I had to seek more and more the company of myself because I did not pay for my education, and I knew that that made me feel awful, even though I was not given the scholarship out of charity but because I won it. Though to be fair, my parents could not have paid the high fees, how could they, my father had been long dead, and my mother, though a Christian woman, for the sake of survival had gone back to being a native in our village town Ibuzo. So though I felt guilty for being on scholarship I was grateful in a way that I had it, because without that good start which those women gave people like me I wonder if I would be here and if you would be reading these horrors. Still, as I was saying, that morning I was late, and I knew I was in trouble. A big Christian girl of fourteen, behaving like a 'bush' girl, irresponsibly. But inside me I knew that I was both a bush girl and a civilized one. I could play both to perfection, depending on the one that was called for. This morning, the humble, quiet Christian was called for, because I was late.

That was why I ran in, stopping by the door, my eyes lowered, my fat navy blue Methodist hymn book clasped to my flat chest (I was a late developer, too skinny). But horror of horrors, I walked into my form Mistress, Mrs Okuyemi. She was black, she was young, she was beautiful, only she never allowed herself to be beautiful. The only day I knew she could smile was when I left school and ran to her house to tell her that I did well in the West African School Examination. She even entertained me. She gave me and my best friend, Kehinde Lawal, a bowl of mixed fruit salad. She treated us like people. So much so that my friend — she was usually more sensible than I was, and I used to copy everything she did because I did not know any other person to copy — said, 'That lady really tried very much to help us, if only we had listened.' Well, it was too late. We had left school by then, and I was already married, even before our school results came out. Anyway all that was still in the future.

This morning Mrs Okuyemi was sitting by the side of our row, as she should, being our form Mistress. She made way for me, not immediately, but kept me waiting long enough for all the subject teachers to see me, standing there. That stupid Ibo girl, with the marks of '10' on her face, had done it again. I stared at the cemented floor. I would not look at anybody's face. Then the other girls all pretended to be disturbed by my lateness. One would have thought that but for my disturbance they would have gone straight away up the imaginary Jacob's ladder in their

desire to be the Pilgrim which Bunyan had idealized in his book *The Pilgrim's Progress* on which that hymn was based. I knew they were all being hypocritical, and I was not wrong, because I could see Kofe Olufowokan's perfect teeth flashing behind her hymn book. Then I collided with Bisi, and her chair clattered on the floor, and Miss Davies stopped the piano, and the Head, Miss Walker lowered her glasses, and Miss Humbe, a giant of a woman, always in sneakers, stood on tip toe. She was the physical education Mistress and also the head of English and literary studies. I tumbled to the end of the row, to make for the empty seat. Why didn't they allow the empty seat to be near the door, I wondered. But then the late comer would have found life easier that way. Still it was better to be late for an Assembly than not to come at all. Our dear Mrs O would know and would then have a 'word' with the sinner. I would rather disturb the whole school than suffer Mrs O's 'word'. It was Hamlet who boasted that he was going to speak daggers, but our Mrs O's word was sharper than daggers. I know this is difficult to imagine, but that was how we had been conditioned to feel.

The morning service went on, after Miss Davies had put her glasses back on and straightened her already stiff shoulders and had tossed her head back. We soon knelt in prayer and finished the morning assembly by singing the school hymn,

Lord grant us like the watching fire,  
To wait thy coming and to strive,  
Each one her lamp to trim...

I felt this hymn was having a go at me. I was the foolish virgin who did not trim her lamp and was too late and unprepared for the Wedding feast. Some people said this story of the foolish virgins in the bible was symbolic, some of us believed it was real. I remember during one of my school holidays I was explaining the meaning of our school hymn to a distant cousin in Ibulu. She was at school too, but not in a 'big school' like mine. At the mention of the virgin she gasped. 'You mean Jesus Christ refused women, even though they were virgins, simply because they did not trim their stupid lamps?' she asked.

'Not just their lamps, Josephine, they were not ready for the wedding' I began.

'I wish I was there. I can trim and fill twenty million lamps if that is all it will take to be a good woman. Not like this rotten place. You have to be a virgin, a virgin all the time.'

I looked at her, too scared to say a word. We were coming to that age where we were not allowed to say everything that came into our heads. But I suspected that my cousin, Jo, would be in a big trouble on her wedding night. She did not say it, she did not need to. And as if to make me sorrier for her she said, 'One can kill a fowl and pour it on the white cloth you use on your first night with your husband.'

I shook my head. I did not know, but went on, 'My mother said that any other blood would go pale before morning. But the real thing would always be red.'

After an uncomfortable silence, Jo said, 'I can trim lamps. I think Christianity is better. Think of all the beatings and humiliations one would have to go through otherwise. Trimming lamps is easier.'

Jo and I were clitorised on the same day, when we were eight, because we belong to the same age group; yet she was saying this.

I was asking about her the other day, twenty years after this conversation. And I was told she was a nun. Still a nun, when I was writing this. Jo, with the narrow face as the Europeans used to describe her, went into a nunnery because she probably thought God would accept girls who by mistake or curiosity or sheer ignorance had become rather adventurous. The fact that it needs two people to experience such an adventure but it was the girl who had to be penalized, makes one think sometimes. But that was what they said clitorisation was supposed to prevent one from doing. I am quite sure I don't know much about that, but if with all that I managed to have five children in five years and all before I was twenty five, imagine what I would have been if I did not have it done. Or is the tradition sheer male brutality? Especially as it was, and still is done in the open, with no anaesthesia of any kind? But I am glad to say all this is slowly dying out. Too slowly perhaps.

Like my cousin Jo. I was taking the school song literally.

But one thing that still surprises me about the discipline of my early school days was our maturity in human relations. No girl reproached you afterwards for disturbing the assembly, not to your face anyway. But the thought of it would die with you. Girls realized even then that that was enough punishment. And that it could happen to them as well. But that they did understand why this kept happening to me, was so humane of them. Or maybe the few people who took the trouble to tell me that I was doing something wrong noticed that I was not confident enough to take any kind of criticism nicely. I still, even now, don't know how people do it. But now in my thirties I've mastered a beautiful art in which I laugh at myself first, so that when criticisms come, they lose their sharpness and

pain. Then I had not mastered the art of masking my emotion. So out of pity, my class-mates would rather not say a word. And because of this, I was ignorant of so many things which the other girls knew and could get away with.

My greatest escape was into literature. I remember clearly the first English story I read by myself. It was *Hansel and Gretel*, who walked hand in hand and were lost in their bed of flowers in a European wood. I read this book several times in my Primary school, and I knew most of the words by heart. I used to imagine myself lost like that in the bush, so that my relatives with whom I was living at the time would be kinder to me and stop beating me for the slightest thing I did; so that my mother would come and stay with my younger brother and I, like we used to do before our father died; so that my mother would love me so much that she would leave her new native husband, who only had to inherit her and not marry her the way my dead father did. Then the second story was that of 'Snow White'. I used to cry my eyes out with those seven dwarfs. And during the school holidays we used to go home to Ibuza. There I virtually drank in all the old ladies' stories in the village.

Later, towards the end of my school days, my work started to suffer. Because the teachers were always intruding into my thoughts, even in the class room. I would build a story in which I was the heroine, and in which I always had enough to eat, and in which I always had a nice bed and not the bug-ridden plank we slept on at Mrs D's boarding house. They used to be such beautiful stories. Thank goodness, I never spoke most of them out. Knowing what I now know of Psychology, I would probably have been certified.

One of the reasons for my imagining my thoughts all by myself happened on the day this story started. After the Assembly, one of the lessons that morning was English Literature. I always guessed Miss Humble did not like me. There was nothing to like about me, anyway. I was always too serious looking, with formidable glasses, and not particularly clean or clever. My class work was steadily going down, and this was making life more difficult. The position was so circular. It was like this. I was afraid of leaving school, it was not a beautiful life but at least it was safe, it was reliable. Because of this fear, I started to dream of another beautiful world, but the funniest thing about this world was that I was always the mother of many children. And the more I wallowed in my dreams, to the extent even of bringing them into the class room, the more my work suffered, and the greater my fear. Because if one was on scholarship and failed an exam, the scholarship would be taken from

that person. I made a good grade in the end, but to achieve this, I drove myself to the brink almost, knowing that it was either that or to die.

Anyway, the tall and broad Miss Humble never liked me. Because I wanted her to like me like she did my friend Kehinde Lawal I used to really try in her literature lesson. And her subject was my best anyway. I used to dream most in Mrs Osho's Maths lesson, especially when she came to the black board with her horrible looking board compass. Girls who were clever in her Maths class said she was good. But I was not good in her subject. Much much later, how I wished she was with me when I had to take Social Statistics when I was reading for my degree in Sociology.

Anyway, Miss Humble did not like me and that was that. And if she did not like me, she had more excuse after my shameful behaviour in the Assembly that morning. She went on reading Coleridge's 'Christabel' and was going

Tu - whiff - Tu - whoo!  
And hark, again the crowing cock,  
How drowsily it crew.

My mouth was agape in wonder. I was no longer looking at a young English teacher with an M.A. in English from Oxford, but I was back in the village land of my ancestors. I was listening to the voice of my father's little mother, with her big head covered in white wooly curls, with saliva trickling down the corner of her mouth, with her face sweating and shining in the sweat, and me sitting by her feet, and the Ukwu tree giving us an illusive shade from the bright moon, and the children, the young ones who could not sit still for stories playing Ogbe. I was there in Iḡuza, in Umuezeokolo, in Odanta, where all my people came from. I was there in that place and did not hear the young English woman born in the Lake District and trained at Oxford, calling me, calling me. Suddenly somebody nudged me. Then Miss Humble's voice came through. Sharp. Angry.

'Florence! Florence! what are you going to be when you grow up?'

'A writer,' I replied.

Silence.

She stretched herself, standing on her toes as if she was determined to reach the ceiling, and pointed stiffly at me. Then she said in a boarse low voice, her protruding teeth looking as if they were going to fall out and



the white hanky she tied around her watch with the masculine band twitching, 'Pride goes before a fall!'

I was now fully awake. 'I said I would like to be a writer,' I began again, just in case she did not hear me at first.

'Go out, out, and straight to the chapel. Go there and pray, for God to forgive you.'

'Eh?' I said.

'And take a bad Mark!'

I then knew this was serious. I was by the door, ready to run for it. Bad marks were added up and shown in one's school report. Some girls even said they put them in one's leaving school testimonial. But nonetheless I wanted to find out what I had exactly done to warrant this untoward punishment. I hesitated just for a split second, my eyes not leaving her face, as she stood there in her ramrod erectness, her hand stretched straight like a poker. I saw her mouth making the shape of another 'bad Mark'. It was then that I ran, past the large glass window of our class room that faced the verandah in the front part of the school. I did not stop until I was sure Miss Humble could see me no longer. Then I started to walk slowly up the stairs towards the chapel that was on the first floor of our large E-shaped school.

My mind was at first blank, with only Miss Humble's voice ringing in my ears. The voice of authority. The voice one had been taught to associate with correctness. The voice one had never questioned. The voice that had simply to be obeyed. Then as I neared the door of the chapel, my own voice, little and at first insecure, started to filter in. 'What are you going to tell God, eh? What Florence are you going to tell Him, when you go inside there to ask His forgiveness. Are you going to say, "Please dear God, don't make me a writer" ... and then at the same time say, 'But dear God, I so wish to be a writer, a story teller like our old mothers at home in Ibadan. But unlike them, I would not have to sit by the moonlight because I was born in an age of electricity, and would not have to tell my story with my back leaning against the Ukwa tree, because now I have learnt to use a new tool for the same art. Now I have learnt a new language, the language of Miss Humble and the rest of them. So where is the sin in that?''

My voice suddenly grew louder, bolder, and it covered up the voice of Miss Humble. I reached the chapel door, and with my head up, I walked past it. God had more important things to do than punish me for saying my dream aloud. Not only did I not go into that chapel to pray, I did not call the bad mark either. I thought about that for many a night, and I

came to the conclusion that Miss Humble probably felt that her language was too pure for the likes of me to want to use it to express myself. Hence to her it was pride to say what I said. But why did she take the trouble to leave her island home and come and teach it to us in the first place? This was one example of the duplicity and near hypocrisy which at that age used to make my head ache so much whenever I wanted to puzzle things out.

But on one point she got me. And that was ordering me out of the class. That kind of action was to us like that meted out to a leper, being excommunicated for just simply being a leper.

I laughed very much when I remembered this scene twenty years later when I was in London, teaching English to English children, and had to order a very difficult and disturbing sixteen-year-old Cockney boy out of the class. I was still new as a teacher. Instead of being ashamed and sorry, the boy was happy and became noisier and started to make faces at the rest of the class through the window. He did not stop at this, but started to bang things against the wall and this brought the school head. I saw him talk to the boy, and with his face purple with anger he asked me in front of the class what I thought I was doing, ordering a boy out of the class. I tried to explain, but the head refused to understand. He made it perfectly clear that in schools like his, the children rule, and teachers have to obey. If you send a child out of the class, you have given him the freedom to go out and vandalise the school, the streets, do all sorts of things. How did those early teachers manage to put such values into us? I soon learnt the ropes in that school. England is a welfare State, one does not need too much education to survive. Nigeria was then and is still now a capitalist state, where you have to work at anything you do to survive. No dole money, no unemployment benefit, and education is highly rewarded. The gap between the rich and the non-rich is very wide. It is nice to be able to travel and sometimes live away from one's native land. I would not be able to know that but for the fact that I later lived in England for eighteen years.

Anyway, as I was saying, I did not call in my bad mark on the following Friday as one was supposed to do, because I felt that I had done nothing wrong. But for the rest of my school career I made sure never to anger a teacher so much as to send me out of the class. So that when I left school, my head, Miss Walker, said in my testimonial that I was mild, pleasant and placid. And she was sure I would do well in anything I set my heart on. Well she was wrong, about the latter. About the former

attributes, I would have been something else, the opposite in fact, if I was only sure of how people would take my outbursts.

I set my mind on making a successful marriage. They taught us at Cins' High School that prayers and devotion could move mountains. Well it did not work out for me that way. And as my marriage neared its end, and I was trying so much to make it work, to make him proud of me, I did again what I did to Miss Humble. That seemed to be my last card in every bad situation. But this time I did not just say it, I actually wrote it down to prove to him that I was something. He got angry and burnt my first manuscript. And I felt the native, bush independent woman in me come to the fore. I packed my dripping four siblings and pregnant self and faced the streets of London. The perseverance which one had learnt to go through during one's school days, coupled with reading so many novels and the capability of being able to think and dream, taught me what everybody knows but only sometimes remembers, namely that no situation is permanent. Those babies with wet nappies dangling between their legs are now grown-up young men and women, battling for University places. Children do become adults. And I said to myself that one day, just one day, when they become adults and I am in my forties, then I would be so confident that I would not have to ask anybody's opinion, then I would write. I would then not need Miss Humble to give me a nice smile and say 'good girl, keep it up', neither would I need a husband to say, 'but you are such a clever wife, do keep it up, and keep writing'.

As it came about, I started to write when I was still in my mid-twenties, but still as insecure as ever. And somehow I survived, just, my head above water, all those years in England. It reads like a story, even to me, so if it reads like that to you, I won't blame you at all. Because sometimes I don't believe some of the things that happened to me. It is very true that some facts can be stranger than fiction.

Buchi Emecheta's autobiographical account will be serialized in the next two issues of *Kunapipi*

## Continuity and Change in Conrad and Ngugi

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's own tribute to Joseph Conrad can be made the starting point of a fruitful exploration. In a lecture referring specifically to *Nostromo*, Ngugi says:

The African writer and Joseph Conrad share the same world and that is why Conrad's world is so familiar. Both have lived in a world dominated by capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism...

Critics have also been quick to follow Conradian echoes in Ngugi's work. Peter Nazareth compares *A Grain of Wheat* with *Nostromo*<sup>2</sup> while Ebele Oburnselu works out a close identification of the most important features of *A Grain of Wheat* with those of *Under Western Eyes*.<sup>3</sup> Where similarities between *A Grain of Wheat* and *Under Western Eyes* are not immediately obvious Lord Jim and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* are brought in to provide a clearer perspective. The risk here is that of creating an almost watertight neatness which ignores the gulf between Conrad's scepticism and Ngugi's commitment to change.

Parameters of consistency, those landmarks unifying an author's canon show that Conrad is ambivalent and Ngugi has a clear point of view. Conrad often tilts precariously towards continuity while Ngugi sees rebellion as the beacon towards change.

What is continuity and what is change? Continuity is the sameness of things beneath turbulent change. Continuity is irony, the irony behind all feverish zeal for change doomed to a repetition or even deterioration of an old order. Says Martin Deccoud in *Nostromo*:

'We convulsed a continent for our independence only to become the passive prey of a democratic parody, the helpless victims of scoundrels and cut-throats, our institutions a mockery, our laws a farce.'<sup>4</sup>

Continuity is deceptive change. Real change is the precious little improvement in danger of being swallowed by yesterday. It stands opposite irony. Says the devoted revolutionary Sophia Antonovna in *Under Western Eyes*:

'Remember, Razumov, that women, children, and revolutionaries have irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action.'<sup>5</sup>

In the essay 'Autocracy and War' (1905) Conrad comes across as a bitter opponent of Russian autocracy and yet in *Under Western Eyes* he makes the choice between this autocracy and the wooden figures parading as revolutionary leaders an invidious task. Even Sophia Antonovna, is called 'wrong-headed'. Peter Ivanovitch, Madame de S—, Nikita nicknamed Necator are presented in a worse light than General T— and Councillor Mikulin, their adversaries. Haldin comes out as an almost demented fanatic. Conrad's revolutionaries are caricatures because their sceptical creator believes that real change is an illusion, 'a will-o'-the-wisp' for which only men of faith (read, 'victims of illusions') will strive. Says the Professor of Languages in *Under Western Eyes*:

'A violent revolution falls into the hands of narrow-minded fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all the pretentious intellectual failures of the time. Such are the chiefs and the leaders. You will notice that I have left out the mere rogues. The scrupulous and the just, the noble, the humane, and devoted natures, the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement — but it passes away from them. They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims: the victims of disgust, of disenchantment — often of remorse. Hopes grossly betrayed, ideals caricatured — that is the definition of revolutionary success.' (*UWE*, 184-5)

The views of the Professor of Languages form the main prism through whom the drama of an autocracy battling a revolution comes to us. It is interesting that these views coincide with those of the main character Razumov. To both, continuity is the nature of change. In the episode where Razumov is trying to fend off Sophia Antonovna's uncomfortable questions surrounding Haldin's arrest, continuity remains uppermost in his mind:

As if anything could be changed! In this world of men nothing can be changed — neither happiness nor misery. They can only be displaced at the cost of corrupted consciences and broken lives — a futile game for arrogant philosophers and sanguinary triflers. (*UWE*, 261)

The anarchists of *The Secret Agent* are toothless bulldogs more

frightening in their speeches and in their unreal programmes than in what they actually achieve. The only revolutionary act in the book, the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, is committed by the half-wit Stevie who perishes on the spot. The revered secret agent Verloc is just what his symbol says he is, the empty space in the triangle of family, untried terrorism and phony respectability.

The unifying force behind Conrad's vision is a ruthless scepticism which questions the very grounds from which his fiction emerges:

The fact is you want more scepticism at the very foundation of your work. Scepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth, the way of art and salvation ... A creator must be indifferent, because directly the 'Fiat' has issued from his lips, there are the creatures made in his image that'll try to drag him down from his eminence, and belittle him by their worship ... You seem for their sake to hug your conception of right and wrong too closely...<sup>4</sup>

The weakest and strongest links in this scepticism are nowhere more obvious than in *Heart of Darkness*, that over-scrutinized and often misunderstood work. Conrad attacks Europe's scramble for Africa which he has described in his *Last Essays* as 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of mankind and of geographical exploration'.<sup>5</sup> In particular, he is attacking King Leopold's devastation and depopulation of the Congo after the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 had endorsed the King's hypocritical views on civilization and geographical exploration and had, in effect, ceded to his personal exploitation what is now Zaïre. A country bigger than Nigeria had been made the private farm of one man! Conrad's attack against this kind of imperialism is forthright and it stems from his rejection of the pretenses that often cover human declarations.

This attack is, all the same, neutralized by Conrad's acceptance of one of the cornerstones of modern imperialism, namely, racism. Conrad's Africans are a subhuman species at the earliest end of the evolutionary scale. Psychoanalysis has surrounded *Heart of Darkness* with an incredible number of fantasies centred on the Freudian 'id', the Jungian 'shadow' or the more common 'outlaw' or 'secret sharer' concept. Achebe is right in saying that in Europe and America *Heart of Darkness* 'fortifies fears and prejudices and is clever enough to protect itself, should the need arise, with the excuse that it is not really about Africa at all'.<sup>6</sup> Much of the blame for the distortion which results from reading the story outside its historical perspective must be placed on Marlow's portentous pronouncements. As Leavis rightly noted, Conrad is striving for effects and only succeeds in cheapening the tone of his story.<sup>7</sup> Without the

critics' tendency to associate the dark forces of the unconscious with Africa and the Africans, i.e. without the racist assumptions at the heart of psychoanalytical criticism, most of what has been read into *Heart of Darkness* hardly holds any water.

*Heart of Darkness* has a clearly identifiable setting in space and time. The point here is that we now need a little anthropology around *Heart of Darkness* and a lot more history. It is often forgotten that *Heart of Darkness* is a story within a story and that its frame, or outward shell, is an evening on board a ship, the *Nellie*, and that the characters in the frame are the bulwarks of commerce and industry; the Director of Companies, an Accountant, a Lawyer, a sailor and the unnamed narrator.

In the prologue to 'one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences' we are given a lecture on Roman imperialism and modern imperialism. The River Thames is shown to be a gateway to piracy, international commerce and the ascendancy of Britain's maritime power as well as the growth of the British Empire.

The main body of Marlow's tale takes us into the workings of a large 'trading' concern based in 'the sepulchral city' of Brussels and sucking the Congo dry. Large areas are devastated and depopulated ('vigorous action', 'unsound methods', etc.) in an insatiable quest for ivory. Taken together with its frame and prologue, Marlow's tale dramatizes imperialism as the most sinister and ruthless stage of capitalism. The chicanery of sanctimonious self-deception ('a labourer is worthy of his hire') and pretenacious declarations (seventeen-page letter to the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs!) is thrown in for good measure. Conrad sees through the hypocrisy of imperialism but accepts uncritically the racist shibboleths on which men like Leopold I built their case. That is the source of failure in *Heart of Darkness*, the source of the strained efforts to impress the reader with the 'abomination of desolation' supposed to be Africa.

It is true that in *Heart of Darkness* imperialism is a form of darkness. Marlow observes that the map of the Congo had ceased to be a wide blank and has become 'a place of darkness'<sup>10</sup>. A French man-of-war is firing into a continent and Marlow sees in the proceedings 'a touch of insanity ... a sense of lugubrious drollery'. The 'purposeless blasting' and the 'wanton smash-up' near the grove of death, the aimless stroll of 'the pilgrims' holding pointless staves, the conflagration and comedy at the Central Station, the trigger-happy road-supervisor who has no road to look at, the brick-maker who has not made a single brick — are all part

of the *dense macabre* which Marlow associates with imperialism.

The darkness of imperialism is then seen as the contradiction between the stated aims of bringing 'civilization, that spark from the sacred fire' to Africa and the naked exploitation and indolence represented by the pilgrims and curious groups like the Eldorado Exploring Expedition which Marlow sees as a bunch of 'sordid buccaneers ... reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage' (*HD*, p. 43). This is the 'paralysed force' built into T.S. Eliot's poem, 'The Hollow Men', a poem inspired by a reading of *Heart of Darkness*.

It has been suggested that 'the chief contradiction of *Heart of Darkness* is that it suggests and dramatizes evil as an active energy but defines evil as a vacancy'.<sup>11</sup> The contradiction is that of imperialism as such — for imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* is an assault on Africa in the name of civilization but with selfish exploitation in mind. In 1876 King Leopold II convened the Brussels Geographical Conference and said:

The subject which brings us together today is one which must be a supreme preoccupation to all friends of humanity. To open to civilization the only area of our globe to which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the gloom which hangs over entire races, constitutes, if I may dare put it that way, a crusade worthy of this century of progress, and I am delighted to note how deeply public opinion approves its accomplishment: the tide is turning our way.<sup>12</sup>

That was the prelude to Leopold's exploitation of the Congo. He speaks of 'the gloom which hangs over entire races'. In the frame of *Heart of Darkness* a 'brooding gloom' hangs over London and 'the sepulchral city' is Brussels. In the grove of death at the coastal station men are dying in a 'greenish gloom' (*HD*, p. 24). Conrad, then, associates gloom, darkness with the unfolding drama of imperialism in Africa. Leopold's speech to the Brussels Geographical Conference resembles Kurtz's seventeen-page letter to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them in the nature of supernatural beings — we approach them with the might of a deity ... By simple exercise of our will, we can exert a power for good practically unbounded...' There were no practical limits to interrupt the magic current of phrases. (*HD*, pp. 71-2)

Leopold does not counsel his officers to 'exterminate all the brutes' as Mr Kurtz does, but he creates a system of taxation and extortion that



amounts to the same thing. In a debate in the Belgian Parliament in 1903, four years after the publication of *Heart of Darkness*, the following letter was quoted:

The District Commissioner Jacques to the Official in Charge of the Station at Inoryo:

M. Chef de Poste,

Decidedly these people of Inoryo are a bad lot. They have just been and cut some rubber ... vines at Huli. We must fight them until their utter submission has been obtained, or their complete extermination.<sup>12</sup>

The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs is not a figment of the imagination either. Leopold did organize an International Society for the Civilization and Exploration of Central Africa. The sordid devastation and depopulation of the Congo was ably reported by the British Consul, Sir Roger Casement, and denounced by various groups in London. The outcry led to the Belgian government's taking over the Congo from the personal rule of King Leopold II. *Heart of Darkness*, then, is at the storm-centre of an important historical event and Conrad's position is clear. He makes Kurtz, the demon of his tale, represent certain declarations:

'Each station shall be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.' (*HD*, p. 47)

Conrad was no doubt familiar with the second item on the agenda of the Brussels Geographical Conference of 1876. It reads as follows:

Location of routes to be successively opened towards the interior, setting-up of medical and scientific posts and of 'pacifying' bases from which to abolish the slave-trade, establishment of peace among the chiefs and provision of just and impartial arbitration etc. etc.<sup>13</sup>

That Conrad shows the other side of this declaration, the sordid side, is very much to his credit and is the strongest point in his scepticism. The racism is something else again ... it damages his art.

Conrad speaks of Africans as 'pre-historic man' (*HD*, p. 51). He accepts the humanity of the Africans as 'a dim suspicion' because Europeans are now remote from 'the night of first ages' (*HD*, p. 51). The case of the fireman is so crassly racist as to need no elaboration here. The fireman is compared to 'a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs' (*HD*, p. 52). Conrad's Africans leap and howl

and make horrid faces. They are associated with witchcraft and cannibalism — nothing more. In what way then is Conrad better than the colonizers and imperialists he is attacking? His Malaysian tales show a concern with the Malay way of life. The Malays think, love and hate just like the Europeans. Not so with Conrad's Africans. They are either still in the night of first ages as in *Heart of Darkness*, or made pawns in the game of slavery as in 'An Outpost of Progress' or at the centre of primordial, inscrutable evil as in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*.

Conrad and Ngugi 'share the same world' and the narrative technique of *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* has much in common with *Under Western Eyes*, *Lord Jim* and especially *Nostromo*. Both authors make extensive time-shifts, flash-backs, interior monologues as well as diaries, letters and reminiscences. Somewhere beyond these devices, a layer or two of satire beneath the ironic mode, similarities end. Conrad believes in doubt and Ngugi in hope. Although *Nostromo*, for example, leaves the reader with such a bitter taste of Latin American upheavals and Anglo-American capitalism, Conrad removes himself from any clear condemnation of either side by looking at the denouement of his story in terms of 'games' or 'opera bouffe'. Political goals are identified with base passions, cynicism parades as 'declarations' and both the exploited and the exploiters are enmeshed in a scramble for loot and plunder. It is perhaps Conrad's lack of a firm point of view which has led both Albert Guerard and F.R. Leavis to detect a certain 'hollowness' about *Nostromo*.<sup>15</sup>

Ngugi's canon hangs together by a different thread. From the earliest and least perfected works to *Petals of Blood* men and women wake up to the contradictions surrounding their lives and strive to undo them. In *The River Between*, Waiyaki's leadership fails precisely because it is unable to meaningfully address itself to the problems of a people whose land is being taken away and who are forced to live on the same lands and pay taxes to a government that has no claim on their allegiance. The war of liberation in *Weep Not Child* gathers its momentum on this very question of land which to peasants like Ngotho was handed down to Gikuyu and Mumbi (the first man and woman) by Murungu (God) who dwells on Keri-nyaga (Mount Kenya). To settlers like Howlands the land is the fruit of their sweat in Africa. It never occurs to people like Howlands that the squatters on their farms may well be the title-holders to these lands, and that the Mau Mau war is on because the present deeds of ownership have no validity.

It is possible to see *A Grain of Wheat* as embodying 'the conservative

moral that ideal historical purpose cannot be imposed on the plurality of our private conditions'.<sup>16</sup> But is the book about 'our private conditions' or about the collective aspiration which sucks into its service unwilling heroes like Mugo and destroys conservative liberals like Thompson? Is it not, in fact, about the collective goal being deflected from its path by selfish M.P.'s who rush to erect enclosures around the very land they should be delivering to the people? The author's note to *A Grain of Wheat* says:

Names like that of Jomo Kenyatta and Waiyaki are unavoidably mentioned as part of the history and institutions of our country. But the situation and the problems are real — sometimes too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see all that they fought for being put on one side.<sup>17</sup>

*Petals of Blood* explores the implications of this statement. In one sense it brings together all that Ngugi stands for as well as all that he deplores. The courage of Nyakinyua and Wanja echoes the courage of Njoroge's mother in *Weep Not Child*. Wanja is a reincarnation of the barmaid Beatrice in *Secret Lives* ('Minutes of Glory') who transcends the contempt of men and other barmaids by stealing from a customer who usually comes to her out of pity. With the money she transforms herself and takes her turn at looking down on the very men who would never have winked at her before her transformation. Eat or be eaten. It matters little that hers have only been a few 'minutes of glory'. Munira's father and mother as well as his wife Julia seem to have been developed from the characters of 'Wedding on the Cross' again in *Secret Lives*. The delegation from Ilmorog to the city echoes the delegation from the village to 'the black hermit' in *The Black Hermit*. The heroism of the cripple Abdulla on 'the long march' to Nairobi echoes the heroism of Mau Mau warriors, and Abdulla himself is associated with Dedan Kimathi, the renowned general in the struggle for independence. On 'the long march' tactics are forged and everyone grows in stature just as in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* the struggle generates new techniques and men and women grow with their struggle. In *Petals of Blood* the various shades of the new entrepreneurial class who are the tempters in *Dedan Kimathi* are now in Blue Hills, an exclusive suburb in which they spend their 'useful' lives in prayer, business deals and cocktail parties. Ngugi is committed to the collective aspiration of a Kenya free from internal and external exploitation. *Petals of Blood* shows how far society has moved away from this goal. The Mau Mau struggle, 'a link in the struggles of black people everywhere', has now been deflected from its correct course by a class

which contributed least and reaped most from its partial victory. Kimeria, the very one who ruins Wanjia, betrays Abdulla's comrade, and Karega's brother Ndinguri, the colonialists' trusted 'spear-bearer', is now one of the richest men in Kenya and one of the brains behind the infamous scheme to administer Mau Mau oath to the Kikuyu of an independent nation in order to defend the holdings of the rich. Ngugi makes this man unmask himself in a statement which combines duplicity with a smug and hollow casuistry:

'You see how things have changed ... Now, Mr Nderi wa Riera. We used to have our little differences. He was what you might call a, eh, a freedom fighter, that is he was a member of the party and was taken to detention. And I was, well, shall we say we didn't see eye to eye! Now we are friends. Why? Because we all realize that whether we were on that side of the fence or on this side of the fence or merely sitting astride the fence, we were all fighting for the same ends. Not so? We were all freedom fighters ...'<sup>18</sup>

The opulence of Blue Hills where we find men like Kimeria (alias Mr Hawkins), Chui, and the Reverend Kamau (alias Rev. Jerrod Brown!) contrasts sharply with the poverty surrounding the heroes of the struggle for independence such as Abdulla. In Blue Hills men have anglicized their names all the better to enjoy their role as the new colonialists:

They stood in the verandah. From there Karega could just manage to see the workers' houses of mud-walls and grass thatch in two lines. And all along Abdulla was thinking: and we fought to end the red fences and red bands on our bodies. Munira was imagining his own father in fervent prayers of devotion (*PB*, pp. 146-7)

The new Wazungu have taken over everything from their predecessors — right down to the last button worn by their menials. We see them here from the point of view of the new proletariat: the trade-unionist Karega sees 'the mud-walls' defining the accommodation of workers in independent Kenya. The heroic follower of Dedan Kimathi immediately thinks of the collective aspirations now being trampled on by the new colonialists and Munira sees a sanctimonious father who would not take the Mau Mau oath to fight for freedom but who takes it (Bible in hand!) to defend property! The spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethos! R.H. Tawney, anyone? *Petals of Blood* derives part of its strength not only from the fire and sparks of paragraphs such as these but also from a kind of symmetry in setting and metaphors. Blue Hills stands on the opposite extreme of the abject poverty in which some of the heroes of the struggle for independence such as Abdulla find themselves:

I waited for land reforms and redistribution.  
I waited for a job.  
I waited for a statue to Kimathi as a memorial to the fallen.  
I waited...  
Still I waited.

I heard that they were giving out loans for people to buy out European farms. I did not see why I should buy lands already bought by the blood of the people. Still I went there. They told me: this is new Kenya. No free things. Without money you cannot buy land; and without land and property you cannot get a bank loan to start business or buy land. It did not make sense. For when we were fighting, did we ask that only those with property should fight? (PB, p. 254)

The logic of 'eat or be eaten' takes care of that question. Abdulla the heroic follower of the legendary Dedan Kimathi is reduced to the life of a vendor of oranges (echoes of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*?), forced to live in the slum quarter of the New Ilmorog of a few flickering neon lights and numerous bars, an industrialized Ilmorog whose soulless character negates all that the forest warriors fought for.

Between 'New Jerusalem', that typical African hell of the dispossessed, and 'Cape Town', the exclusive suburb of the 'master-servants of bank power, money and cunning' stands All Saints Church, 'now led by Rev. Jerrod Brown. Also somewhere between the two areas was Wanja's Sunshine Lodge, almost as famous as the Church' (p. 281). Church and brothel between exploiters and exploited. Physical and spiritual amnesia to mediate contradictions.

The point being made here is that although Ngugi is not using a fictional republic such as Conrad's *Costaguana*, he has endowed his Ilmorog with all the existential immediacy typical of a Conradian microcosm. We see Ilmorog change from a sleepy rural backwater with all the idiocy typical of such a stage of development (and Ngugi overdoes this idiocy, especially in the cult that follows the forced landing of the surveyors' plane!) to a modern manufacturing town — all through the coming together of four complete strangers with interlocking histories: Abdulla, Munira, Wanja and Karega:

'It seems to me that we all have our reasons for coming to Ilmorog. But now we are here. There is a crisis facing the community. What shall we do about it?' (PB, p. 113)

From this point on the roles of the four protagonists are clearly demarcated. Karega, who develops into a tradeunionist of national stature, is the man of action. His ideas are tested and perfected in action. Munira the dreamer tells us most of what we know about Ilmorog. In his

statement at the New Ilmorog Police Station are included the personal remembrances of Nyakinyua, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla. Thanks to Inspector Godfrey's way of investigating crime, Munira's statement constitutes the bulk of *Petals of Blood*. Ngugi returns to this statement at every crucial turn in the plot, though we must also assume an unnamed first-person omniscient narrator who waxes lyrical at times (to praise Munira, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla) and impresses on us a sense of historical continuity from geological times to the present theories of Ogot, Muriuki, Were and Ochieng (*PB*, p. 67). A whole country is on the move and the narrative grows into an epic extolling Ndemi, Tshaka, Amilcar Cabral, Nkrumah, etc.

Wanja is the innocent girl whom the changes in Kenya's history develop into a formidable entrepreneur. We see in her humiliation, poverty and later wealth the 'eat or be eaten' philosophy. Though she joins the exploiters whom she cannot defeat, we still have the lingering belief that she is at heart with the oppressed. Even Karega for all his profound lecture on choice and commitment (*PB*, pp. 326-7) does not remove our sympathy from Wanja. It is a fitting tribute (sentimental, perhaps, too close to Hollywood!) that we see her at the end expecting a baby — she who has suffered so much for the lack of one. It is again a fitting tribute to both Wanja and Abdulla that the baby should be for Abdulla now transformed in Wanja's imagination into 'images of Kimathi in his moments of triumph and laughter and sorrow and terror — but without one limb' (*PB*, p. 338).

There are other dimensions to Wanja's development. She is associated with fire and when the light in her hut in pre-industrial Ilmorog is accidentally blown out by Munira, we see her 'think of the water and the fire of the second coming to cleanse and bring purity to our earth of human cruelty and loneliness' (*PB*, p. 55). Wanja's second exit from the city follows a fire which consumes her belongings. It also reminds her of the fire which burnt her aunt. Perhaps through Wanja a fire is going to burn up the dispensation of the Chuis, Mzigos, Kimerias, but the murder and arson in Sunshine Lodge are not a revolutionary act. Already Nderi wa Riera, M.P., the ghoul who thrives on Kenya's human and natural resources with the help of foreign capital, is organizing 'a strong delegation to all cabinet ministers and to even higher authorities if necessary to demand a mandatory death sentence for all cases of theft, with or without violence' (*PB*, p. 184). This isolated act of arson in Sunshine Lodge is like the doomed heroism of Wanja's grandfather, a lesson against the 'tendency to act alone' (*PB*, pp. 324-6).

In one sense, however, the murder and arson are a form of liberation. Wanjia lays the ghost of Kimeria once and for all. Abdulla admires Munira for doing what was in his own mind (*PB*, p. 316) and Munira for the first time becomes an active participant in the events around him. It matters little that he is already 'not of this world'. The fact is that he no longer feels a stranger to himself and can pour his soul on the page to the extent of giving us almost the whole of *Petals of Blood*. That poetic energy long dammed by a puritanical father, an even more rigorous puritanical wife (prayers before and after making love), a hopeless love for Wanjia, alcohol, horoscopes, and now millenarian zeal, finds its fullest outlet at the Police Station. No more advertisements about Then'eta now. The real Muse is out...

Ngugi, like Conrad, orchestrates his images, symbols and setting. Unlike Conrad, however, he endows his world with perpetual motion. The Ilmorog that is slowly dying in the sun when Munira first drives his iron horse through it is merely resting from geological formations and the frantic activities of Ndemi, ancient traders, ancient wars, the slave-trade, the coming of the white man, two world wars, the struggle for independence. In five years it is a very different Ilmorog. We see Kenya's transition from a subsistence economy to large-scale farming, enclosures, small-scale industries and the strangle-hold of money-men from Nairobi and overseas. Nairobi waxes in direct proportion to the wasting away of places like Ilmorog:

'In my mind I now put this wretched corner beside our cities: skyscrapers versus mud-walls and thatch; tarmac highways, international airports and gambling casinos versus cattle-paths and gossip before sunset. Our erstwhile masters had left us a very unevenly cultivated land: the centre was swollen with fruit and water sucked from the rest, while the outer parts were progressively weaker and scragglier as one moved away from the centre.' (*PB*, p. 49)

When 'progress' does come to Ilmorog, the present exchanges his tiny holdings for an even more precarious existence than the one he had before:

'They crowded around the man fascinated as much by the up-and-down motion of his adam's apple as by the rounded voice coming out of the loudspeaker. Demarcation. Title deeds. Loans. Fencing the land. Barbed wire. One or two grade cows...' (*PB*, p. 268)

It all sounds magical. Is this not the coming of a new earth? 'Long live Nderi wa Riera! We gave him our votes: we waited for flowers to bloom'

(*PB*, p. 268). Ngugi's irony is at its most devastating pitch as the narrative is suddenly broken off and we return to a different issue altogether. When we meet 'progress' again, seven pages later, Nyakinyua's land is being sold by auction and she becomes only one of many victims across the land who are now at the mercy of auctioneers, bankers, and lawyers — that priestly caste of parasites in Nairobi:

'She was not alone: a whole lot of peasants and herdsmen of Old Ilmorog who had been lured into loans and into fencing off their land and buying imported fertiliser and were unable to pay back were similarly affected. Without much labor, without machinery, without breaking with old habits and outlook, and without much advice they had not been able to make their land yield enough to meet their food needs and pay back the loans. Some had used the money to pay school fees. Now the inexorable law of the metal was driving them from the land.' (*PB*, p. 275)

Nyakinyua's desperate effort to regain her land is reminiscent of the desperate attempts by Okonkwo (*Things Fall Apart*) to persuade his countrymen to stand up to the new dispensation:

She tramped from hut to hut calling upon the peasants of Ilmorog to get together and fight it out. They looked at her and shook their heads: whom would they fight now? The government? The banks? KCO? The Party? Nderi? Yes, who would they really fight? But she tried to convince them that all these were out and that she would fight them: '... I'll go alone... my man fought the white man. He paid for it with his blood... I'll struggle against these black oppressors... alone... alone' (*PB*, p. 276)

Although Nyakinyua dies peacefully in her sleep, she carries her defiance with her to the grave. 'She had said she could not think of being buried in somebody else's land: for what would her man say to her when she met him on the other side?' (*PB*, p. 276). Wanja redeems her land on the day of the sale.

This heroism forces Wanja back into prostitution. It is the origin of Sunshine Lodge, that elegant brothel between 'Cape Town' and 'New Jerusalem'. Eat or be eaten. Wanja becomes wealthy and powerful. No, not pornography is dramatized here but the progressive deterioration of the moral horizon in direct proportion to the consolidation of 'development' in New Ilmorog. As that sceptic in *Nostromo* would put it:

'There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle.' (*Nostromo*, p. 511)



Quite a critique of the self-fulfilling prophecies of nineteenth century liberalism and laissez faire economics. We have no evidence to show that Conrad's bedside reading included Adam Smith, Riccardo, Bentham, Marx, but we have no reason to doubt that ideas that by 1900 were common currency in England helped to shape his view of the world. He may well have felt like Thomas Carlyle that the economics of his day was 'the dismal science'. We therefore have in *Nostromo* a world of ceaseless human activity and an amoral political economy. The exploitation of Costaguana for the benefit of England and America is rarely seen or condemned in moral times. On the reverse side it is not supported for moral reasons either. There are sentimental moralists in *Nostromo* as there are in most of Conrad's works. There is Holroyd who gives financial backing to Charles Gould because (a) he admires Gould's mettle and (b) he wants to bring to Costaguana 'a purer form ... of Christianity', i.e. Protestantism as opposed to Catholicism in which he sees a lot of idolatry. There is Charles Gould himself, 'El Rey de Sulaco', the uncrowned king of this typical 'third-world' outpost of Anglo-American imperialism. He says that his commitment to the silver mine is for peace and justice in Costaguana:

'What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security. Anyone can declaim about these things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist.' (*N*, p. 84)

Holroyd and Gould are exposed as sentimental men who are masking basic human passions with high-sounding declarations. Holroyd enjoys his power over Charles Gould and the Gould Concession. He enjoys holding in his hands the fate of a country (and in effect that of a continent!) for twenty minutes once in a while. It is a pet dream and gives him his only holiday in many years. His love of power includes a belief in the doctrine of America's 'manifest destiny':

'We shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith's sound, and beyond, too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlying islands and continents of the earth. We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not.' (*N*, p. 77)

The last stage of imperialism? And much more. Holroyd is also an exponent of the Monroe Doctrine: 'Europe must be kept out of this conti-

ment' (*N*, p. 78). With the Gould Concession Holroyd has in his grip the Republic of Costaguana 'lock, stock and barrel' (*N*, p. 81). The Ribierist Party is funded from a bank next door to the Holroyd offices in San Francisco. When later Martin Decoud works out his plan of secession for the sake of his fiancée, it is the Gould Concession which bankrolls this 'Katangese' adventure. Men may kill each other in Costaguana as much as they please and make all the declarations they can together with all the parliamentary and diplomatic niceties which Don Avellanos is so fond of. The shots are called in San Francisco.

Holroyd's other hobby, the endowment of churches and the bringing of a purer form of Christianity to Costaguana is unmasked by Mrs Gould. She sees Holroyd's true religion as 'the religion of silver and iron' and Holroyd's own God as a sort of 'influential partner who gets his share of profits in the endowment of Churches' (*N*, p. 71).

That other moralist, Charles Gould, is unmasked well before he begins work on the San Tome mine. During his courtship of Emilia, he puts his love of minerals before his fiancée. When he brings to her the news of his father's death and she is trying to offer the usual condolences, he is pre-occupied with a broken marble vase in her aunt's house. So profound is the effect of rocks, minerals, mines on his psyche that they lead him to a kind of 'subtle infidelity' to his wife. They turn him on! The San Tome mine first turns 'into a fetish' then into a monstrous and crushing weight. 'It was as if the inspiration of their early years had left her heart to turn into a wall of silver-bricks...' (*N*, pp. 221-2). Later when the Monterist forces are on the verge of taking over Sulaco he makes preparations to blow up the mine! His real love had better be annihilated than fall into the wrong hands!

Conrad predetermines the direction in which the affairs of Costaguana will go, that is, neither backwards nor forwards but round and round in circles. It is not so much 'the curse of futility' upon the people's character deplored by the sceptic Decoud (*N*, p. 171) as a fixed sterility that precludes meaningful change here. The land has been forsaken by good and evil (*N*, p. 7) and is associated with the legend of treasure-hunters blighted by the Midas touch (*N*, pp. 4-5). Silver is as pervasive as ivory in *Heart of Darkness* and the exploitation here is only a shade more subtle, though in both cases the cow in 'the third world' is milked for all it is worth. Again Decoud is the one who sees in the new imperialism only a different version of the adventures of the bold buccaneers (*N*, p. 170).

There is in *Nostromo* the appearance of action on a grand scale — wars and rumours of war. Yet a monotonous sameness envelops the land

— the many changes of government are unrelated to the real centre of power, the silver mine which continues to send its treasures to the north. The time-shifts also play interesting tricks on our understanding of Costaguana's affairs. We first see President Ribiera after he has been overthrown, arriving in Sulaco on a horse which expires under him at the end of the Alameda 'where the military band plays sometimes in the evenings between the revolutions' (*N*, p. 11). We see him next three chapters later (but eighteen months earlier!) turning the sod on the National Central Railway and praising the foreigners working on the 'great patriotic undertaking' (*N*, p. 34).

The first three chapters of *Nostromo* are given us with the sound of gunfire in the background, and the main body of Decoud's letter to his sister which constitutes a central part of the story is written by candlelight in Viola's house after a day of uprisings, sporadic gunfire and ineffectual deliberations by parliamentarians on a possible surrender. This also will be one of Costaguana's ineffective revolutions. There have already been at least two since Mrs Gould's arrival and no real change has taken place in Costaguana. Change comes with secession (to keep Decoud next to his fiancée and Gould's silver flowing north!) and that only leaves the people threatening another revolution to unite their divided country.

The point here is that Conrad is sceptical about the possibility of any real meaningful change in human affairs, although he also shows that human beings will always want change, hence the epigraph from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*:

'So foul a sky  
clears not  
without a storm'

Conrad sees history as a cyclical process of human endeavours and certain failure, man's essence being his insistence on rebuilding the very Tower of Babel which continually crumbles before his eyes. In *Nostromo* Viola, the faithful follower of Garibaldi (whose inn is called 'Albergo d'Italia Una', the 'House of United Italy') is a living example of a betrayed cause ('too many kings ruled yet in the land that God had created for the people') and the scholarly Avellanor's attempt at seeing the history of his country in terms of an ordered progression towards genuine patriotism (*Fifty Years of Mirule*) is used as cannon fodder in the Monterist uprising. Man is always creating and trying to live by certain values, and as Robert Penn Warren observes: 'The victory is never won,

the redemption must be continually recaptured.<sup>18</sup> Conrad the sceptic posits not despair but the existence in man (and in society!) of tendencies towards change, though again, these changes are doomed to failure. Although the Occidental Province we see at the end of *Nostromo* seems materially better than the one we see at the beginning, the moral horizon is dark. Decoud's action has legalized balkanization and the very fiancée for whom all this was done is now clamoring for unity. Secret societies are organizing, some on Marxist lines. The struggle continues...!

Ngugi's sense of history is not cyclical. There is a clear progression from ancient tyrannies to modern inequalities. In all this the people of Kenya have stood up against oppression and degradation. Chapter Two of *A Grain of Wheat* traces the struggle to the days when women ruled and became tyrannical (and were overthrown by the united action of their long-suffering husbands!) right up to the eve of independence. In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi's dissection of the travesty of dawn is only matched by an almost lyrical tribute to the courage of men like Abdulla, Nding'uri, Ole Masai and the great general Dedan Kimathi. As the seasons change and the land blossoms and cracks to be later traversed by the Trans-Africa highway and New Ilmorog, we are continually reminded of struggles against drought and against human greed and oppression. Heroes walk the stage not only of Kenya's history but of the history of black people everywhere. Dessalines, Toussaint L'Overture, Cabral, Mondlane, etc. But the truly significant events in *Petals of Blood* are centred around the four otherwise insignificant characters: Munira, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla. Their coming together transforms Ilmorog (for better, for worse!) and to the very end we see them involved in struggles. Karega's work with the trade-union movement has politicized the workers and they are ready to hurl defiance at their greedy employers. The struggle will continue on other fronts such as Siriana Secondary School where the Chuis will meet the resistance of pupils like Joseph, the revolutionary heir to Abdulla, Wanja and Karega. The 'bedbugs', 'jiggers' and other parasites of the system will be confronted. This is Ngugi's bitterest denunciation of capitalism — and it is important that it is delivered by Karega, whose perception of Kenya's contradictions is the clearest of any character in *Petals of Blood*:

Her voice only agitated further images set in motion by her revelation. Imperialism: capitalism: landlords: earthworms. A system that bred hordes of round-bellied jiggers and bedbugs with parasitism and cannibalism as the highest goal in society. This system and its profligating gods and its ministring angels had hounded his mother to her grave. These parasites would always demand the sacrifice of blood

from the working masses ... The system and its gods and its angels had to be fought consciously, consistently and resolutely by all the working people.

The message to Karega from the trade union movement is a defiant, 'You'll come back!' Ngugi has been working towards this in the titles to the four sections of *Petals of Blood*:

PART ONE: WALKING...

PART TWO: TOWARDS BETHLEHEM -

PART THREE: TO BE BORN

PART FOUR: AGAIN ... LA LUTA CONTINUA!

The first three sections evoke the Yeatsian critique of the modern age:

And what rough beast its hour come round at last  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born  
(*'The Second Coming'*)

The beast is the travesty of dawn in Africa. The last part, 'the last duty' to remember is that the struggle continues — *La luta Continua!*

## NOTES

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17. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (Heinemann, London, 1967).
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# Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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## INTERVIEW

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was invited to Denmark by the Danish Library Association to take part in their 75th anniversary celebrations. Whilst in Denmark he visited Aarhus University and was interviewed by the following persons: Jürgen Martini, Anna Rutherford, Kirsten Holst Petersen, Vibeke Stenderup, and Bent Thomsen. The interview took place on 9 December 1980.

*KHP: Ever since you have been here you have been involved in a discussion about Karen Blixen. Would you like to say something about this?*

I must say she is one of my pet subjects. This is partly because she illustrates some attitudes by a certain type of European or Western mind towards Africa, and so when I'm illustrating these attitudes towards Africa by certain racist writers I try to use examples from her. Her name cropped up when I was talking to the Danish Library Association and I mentioned the two or the three types of Africa to be found in the Western bourgeois mind. There is the Africa of the hunter for profit, that is the Africa of the direct economic exploiter. Then we have the Africa of the hunter for pleasure, that is the tourist's Africa. I also mentioned that the Africa of the tourist was essentially the Africa of the hunter after profit. The third Africa which I spoke of is the Africa found in the fiction of a certain type of European writer which sets out to interpret the African scene. It was in this context that I quoted Karen Blixen. I find her sinister in the sense that her racism is passed off as an act of love. My main argument is that her declared *love* for the African is really the same kind of love which you exhibit towards an animal. She made definite distinctions between human beings who were Europeans, and animals who were Africans. Within that basic understanding she could love Africans of all sexes, as she says, but very much as part and parcel of the animal landscape. Just to illustrate this point: She creates a character who is her cook and as she is a very gifted writer with words,

phrases and details, she is able to create characters we can see visually. But in the end she compares Kamante (her cook) to a civilized dog that has long lived among human beings. In her book *Shadows in the Grass* which was published by Michael Joseph in 1960 she repeats the same racist mythology about Africa. In this book she said quite categorically that African grown-up people had all the mentality of European children of nine. According to her there were some who were a bit more advanced, e.g. the Somali, and they had all the mentality of the European child of seventeen. Now Karen Blixen of course is only one among many who held these racist attitudes towards Africa. They include writers like Elspeth Huxley, Robert Ruark, Rider Haggard, philosophers like Hegel, historians like Trevor Roper, plus many others. In other words she belongs to a certain category of writers about Africa.

*KHP: Do you find that she differs from that other set of writers that you mentioned?*

No, she is basically the same except that she goes beyond them in the sense that at least the others do in a certain strange sense recognize the humanity of the African even when they hate it. But Karen Blixen doesn't say 'I hate Africans', she says 'I love them', but she loves them as she loves children or animals. In her book *Out of Africa* she says that when she first came to Kenya she studied the game and then she says 'what I learnt from the game of Africa was very useful to me when I later came to deal with the natives'; in other words, in extending this one might say that her study or knowledge of the wild animals gave her a clue to the mentality of the African. So I would argue that she is more dangerous than all of them because she does not concede any humanity to the African. Her love of the African is only when he is understood as an animal or a child. Now when this is understood and accepted she can even be very passionate about him, she can weep, treat him, miss him, she can evoke all the emotions that human beings often have towards a wild creature, and this I'm afraid has been mistaken to mean that she has recognized the humanity of the African when in fact her love is based on a rejection of that humanity.

*VS: Since you have been in Denmark you have met a number of Danish writers and people interested in African literature and in co-operation between rich and poor countries. Do you feel that later generations of Karen Blixen's fellow-countrymen are to be trusted so that there is some*



*sense in continuing the co-operation, or do you feel that the country is better left to itself?*

You put a number of things together. The question of people meeting and having a healthy dialogue is very important. People like Karen Blixen are in fact a barrier to this kind of a dialogue, so by trying to focus attention on a writer like Karen Blixen I would like to see Danish people face up to the content in her work and not just see the beauty of the prose. In that way people can begin to have a real dialogue, even if it is a dialogue about aid. When people like Karen Blixen were developing the racial myths and ideology, in essence it was not really personal. They did it on behalf of certain class and historical forces at work in the world then and even today, and the reason why she is being revived is because the same mythology is having a certain ideological purpose as far as exploitation of Africa today is concerned. Karen Blixen was more than a Danish person, she was the spokesman for the imperialist bourgeoisie or imperialist forces of the exploiting classes all over the world. That is why she is very acceptable in America, in Germany and in England because she articulates an ideology which makes the exploitation of Africa more acceptable. What such writers want to prevent you from seeing is that the wealth of Europe is based on the poverty of Africa. As I told the Danish Library Association, they do a tremendous service to the Danish people in this dialogue we have been talking about, if they bring home to the Danish people that Europe's unbounded wealth is based on the exploitation of Africa. As Brecht reminded us: the food eaten by the wealthy classes in Europe is 'snatched from the mouths of the hungry' in the developing world, and the water that they drink is taken from the mouths of the thirsty. We have a saying which is a practice amongst the farmers of my country that when they want to milk a cow they give it some grass so that they can milk it better. Aid is the grass, given to a cow whilst it is being milked.

*KHP: You have said that Karen Blixen serves this ideological purpose. Why do you think there is a need to revive this ideology now?*

Because the exploitation of Africa still continues, and this exploitation in the neo-colonialist period of imperialism still needs an appropriate ideology. Karen Blixen, whose racism is projected as love, is more appropriate to exploitation in the neo-colonialist phase than the crude, obvious racism of people like Elspeth Huxley or Rubert Ruark. These will not do, but Karen Blixen will do very well.

*JM: During the Frankfurt Book Fair there was a long discussion about what language an African writer should use. There have been some who say you are no longer a Kenyan writer. Perhaps you can say something about this.*

I certainly make a distinction between literature written by Africans in European languages and the literature written by Africans in African languages. A literature written by Africans in European languages is what I now call Afro-European literature; in other words those of us who have been writing in English, French or Portuguese have not been writing African literature at all, we have been writing a branch of literature that can only meaningfully go under the title of Afro-European literature. This is to be distinguished very firmly from that literature written by Africans in African languages, treating African themes. The question of language is obviously fundamental here; as Fanon said, 'to choose a language is to choose a world'. In the same way when you choose a language, objectively you are choosing an audience, and more particularly a class. You cannot possibly write in English and assume that you are writing for the African peasantry, or even a section of that peasantry. There is no way, because the moment you write in English you assume a readership who can speak and read English, and in this case it can only mean the educated African élite or the foreigners who speak the language. This means that you are precluding in terms of class the peasantry of Africa, or the workers in Africa who do not read or understand these foreign languages.

There are other aspects to language which can only be understood in the colonial context. The colonizing people or nations or classes looked down upon African languages; indeed, in some cases African children at school were given corporal punishment for speaking their own languages. Others have been made to carry humiliating signs for speaking African languages, signs saying 'I am stupid!' What happens to the mentality of a child when you humiliate him or her in relationship to a particular language? Obviously he comes to associate that language with inferiority or with humiliation and punishment, so he must somehow develop antagonistic attitudes to that language which is the basis of his humiliation. By extension he becomes uncomfortable about the people who created that language and the culture that was carried by it, and by implication he comes to develop positive attitudes to the foreign language for which he is praised and told that he is intelligent once he speaks it well. He also comes to respect and have a positive attitude to the

culture carried by the foreign language, and of course comes to have a positive attitude to the people who created the language which was the basis for the high marks he was getting in school. What does this mean in practical terms? It means that he comes to feel uncomfortable about the peasant masses or working masses who are using that language. So while we African writers continue to write in European languages we are in fact perpetuating a neo-colonial cultural tradition. No matter the subject matter of our novels and plays and poems, and no matter the attitude towards the classes in those novels, poems and plays, if I say that these things can only be articulated within borrowed tongues it means that even at our progressive or our radical best we are in fact continuing the neo-colonial tradition which we are setting out to oppose. In that way we are involved in an immediate kind of contradiction.

So what happens when you write in an African language? First, you create a positive attitude to that language. The reader, when he feels that this language can carry a novel with philosophical weight or a novel which totally reflects his environment, will develop a positive attitude to that language, to the people who created that language, and to the culture and traditions carried by it. And if he begins to have respect for his immediate language, by extension he will also have a respect for all the other languages that are related to his language and to the history and culture related to that language. So to answer your question: the choice of Kikuyu language was a very deliberate choice; it was a conscious decision, although I was forced into it by the peculiar historical circumstances in which I found myself.

A further point I would like to add to this: For a long time African languages and cultures have not been communicating with one another, but have been communicating via English; in other words I have a sense of Iboeness in Achebe's novels through his use of English. The moment African writers start writing in African languages some of the novels will be translated into other African languages as well as into English. The moment you get an Ibo novel translated into Kikuyu or a Yoruba novel translated into Hausa you are getting these languages and cultures talking and communicating directly and mutually enriching one another. So far from these languages being a divisive force they become an integrative force, because they will be enhancing a respect for each other's languages and cultures as well as showing the similarities between the various cultures and their concerns.

JM: *You said that you got an impression of Iboness or Yorubaness through the English language. In what way do you think that we can get an impression of Kikuyu sensibility in your novels through the English language?*

I said maybe one can, but I don't think it is very effective through the English language. I have come to realize this after I have written a novel in Kikuyu and collaborated on a play in Kikuyu. What I want to see is the reader's reaction to my own translation of my Kikuyu novel into English. It will be very interesting to see, assuming that the quality of the novel is about the same as the other novels, whether a different type of sensibility will emerge. There is no way in which one can effectively represent one sensibility in another language because all the nuances in one language cannot be passed on to or carried by another language. In writing the novel in Kikuyu I found myself playing around with sequences of sound patterns for the sheer kick of it and also to suggest a certain kind of meaning. Obviously when I translate this into English it will be lost on the English reader, and there is no way I can help this. This is because the sound patterns and nuances depend on certain cultural assumptions in a community.

AR: *You can reach a large audience with drama. I wonder what size audience you can reach with a novel, even when it is written in Kikuyu?*

Obviously the novel is limited in that sense, but both forms are limited to a certain extent, because a play needs actors, so as long as a play is not being performed it is not reaching anybody. And sometimes you get long periods between performances of a play, whereas the novel is there all the time. But I agree with you that with one performance of a play you are reaching many more people than you can reach in the novel form, and even more important, it is a more collective form, but here — and I want to put quite a big 'but' — with the publication of the Kikuyu novel I have had experiences which have made me start to question my own assumptions about the real tradition of the novel. When I was teaching in Nairobi, for instance, I would argue that the bourgeois novel in its reader tradition assumed an individual reader, reading silently. But when the Kikuyu novel came out it was bought by families who would get somebody who reads very well to read for everybody. In other words the novel was appropriated by the peasantry, it became a collective form and part of the oral tradition. Even the people who could read Kikuyu

preferred to read it in groups, and I have been told that workers in factories during lunch hour would gather together and get one person to read the novel for them. This has made me start questioning the relationship between the novel and the reader. It could well be that the novel has remained this kind of individual thing between the individual and the reader because it has been appropriated by certain classes, but when it is appropriated by the peasantry and the working classes it may very well be transformed into a collective experience.

The second half of this interview will be published in the next issue of *Kanopipi*. In the second section Ngugi discusses his own novels and the Mau Mau movement.



Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Photo: Peter Højrup

# Frank Mkalawile Chipasula

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## WARRIOR

Imitation warrior  
in synthetic monkey skins

over a three-piece suit  
inevitable overcoat, stick,

homburg hat, dark glassed  
and false toothed smiles;

he clutched horse-hair  
flywhisk and plastic spears

at conference tables in Whitchall  
fighting with words only

begging his masters for a new name,  
a flag and a new anthem.

'Out of your people's skins  
fashion a flag, their bones a flagpole;

Their laments shall be your anthem;  
Rename the country and it shall be.'

That is the recipe of his rule  
sincere to the last instruction.

Meanwhile, the settlers massacred  
his people with volleys

of bullets, littering their  
mangled bodies like trash

all over our country: Over them  
he preached non-violence, forgiveness

and the masters, relieved, curled up  
in bed and slept without headaches.

Now he prances clumailly among survivors  
mourning their kin at his rallies

as he samples the men for export  
to the deep dungeons of Joni

on loan and Aid agreements  
for the bribe of blood rands.

He demands handclaps  
everywhere he turns he confronts

his inflated portraits  
nailed and hoisted on flagpoles

whose blood-drenched banners  
are birds straining at ropes.

Corrugated mist like fish scales  
covers the eyes of the praise

dancers round him dancing for  
the war lost to the settlers.

Then the songs shore up his lofty  
platform as he leaves his people

at its foot, steeled with spears  
and shields praising the deserter.

They hail him Messiah, Saviour  
as he fattens on larceny.

— for David, and Derek Walcott —

## Ambiguity in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

The major conflicts in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* develop around the person of the Chief Priest of the god Ulu who is the ritual and religious leader of Umuaro. On the one hand, there is the conflict between the local British administration represented by Winterbottom, the District Commissioner, and the native authority represented by Ezeulu, the Chief Priest. On the other hand, there are the internal politics of Umuaro and the conflict between the supporters of Ezeulu and those of his rival, Egidemili. On yet another level belongs the conflict taking place within Ezeulu himself, a conflict between personal power, the temptation to constitute himself into an 'arrow' of God, and the exigencies of public responsibility. All these are handled in the main plot. A subsidiary plot deals with the domestic tensions and crises in Ezeulu's own household, the tensions and stresses between the father and his grown-up sons and between the children of different mothers in his polygamous household.

Not all these conflicts are a result of culture contact or power politics within the traditional framework. Personality deficiencies and mistaken judgements have something to do with them. The aim of this paper is to show that Ezeulu is not only a complex but an ambiguous character. He is ambiguous because his motives are always mixed and spring from numerous, often conflicting, interests dictated in part by his personal drives and in part by the demands of his priestly office. The result is that he appears in different ways to different characters in the novel. Thus, to his eldest son, Edego, he is a quintessential paternalist. Edego complains that 'He must go on treating his grown children like little boys, and if they ever said no there was a big quarrel. This was why the older his children grew the more he seemed to dislike them' (p. 113). To Akuebue, his best friend, he is a proud and stubborn man but at the same time a model of integrity. Akuebue defends his integrity to the rest of the elders



over the New Year Feast controversy, when it is suggested that he is starving the community out of his capricious will and not in obedience to Ulu. 'He is a proud man and the most stubborn person you know is only his messenger,' says Akuebue, 'but he would not falsify the decision of Ulu' (p. 266). His enemies, especially Nwaka of Umunneora, and the priest of Idemili, see him as a power-monger who delights in imposing his will on others. 'He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all. His father, they said, was like that. But Umuaro showed him that Igbo people knew no kings' (p. 33). Captain Winterbottom sees him also as a man of integrity who could stand up for truth in a land dispute between two rival villages, Umuaro and Okperri, but erroneously attributes this integrity to the man's religious scruples; 'he must have had some pretty fierce tabu working on him' (p. 45), he tells Clarke, his deputy and newly-arrived British administrator.

Despite the cloak of ambiguity that surrounds the character of Ezeulu, one central fact is clear: Ezeulu the man cannot be easily separated from Ezeulu the Chief Priest of Ulu — though it is possible to see when the factor of personal character is dominant, as in Ezeulu's dealings with members of his family, and when the priestly character takes over, as in the consideration of serious affairs of politics and religion. But one must not over-emphasize the separation of these aspects and the roles attaching to them. Even in his private relationships, the priest is often not far away from the man. Akuebue sums up the composite nature of Ezeulu's personality when he says to him: 'Half of you is man and the other half spirit' (p. 164), a fact symbolically represented when half his body (the spirit side) is painted over with white chalk on religious ceremonies. It is also said that 'half of the things he ever did were done by this spirit side' (p. 241). And herein lies the essentially tragic and ambiguous nature of Ezeulu's character, with the divine essence in him always straining to assert its integrity in the face of distracting interference from his human essence.

The narrative in *Arrow of God* starts *in medias res*, dipping back from time to time into the past for the historical material with which Achebe shows the coming into existence of the six villages that now comprise Umuaro. From these brief but significant flashes back into the past, we build up a picture of the pre-colonial society with which the colonial present is contrasted. At a critical stage early in the narrative, after he has seen his advice set aside by the community, not once but twice in quick succession, Ezeulu reviews the situation, using the opportunity to reiterate the

historical and ritual charter of his role as first among the elders of the clan:

In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between, the six villages — Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuaga, Umuesani, Umuogwuwa and Umuizuze — lived as different people, and each worshipped its own deity. Then the hired soldiers of Abam used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to houses and carry men, women and children into slavery. Things were so bad for the six villages that their elders came together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine-men to instal a common deity for them. This deity which the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu. . . . The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy. (p. 17)

But all that seems to have suddenly changed. When the novel opens, the authority of the Chief Priest is under active attack from the priest of Idemili who uses his kinsman, the wealthy, volatile and demagogic titled elder Nwaka of Umunneora. Relegated to subordinate status because of the creation of Ulu, Idemili's priest has never forgotten this setback and has been in latent opposition to the priest of Ulu from time immemorial. Ezeulu himself is aware of this: 'He knew that the priests of Idemili, and Ogwugwu and Bru and Udo had never been happy with their secondary role since the villages got together and made Ulu and put him over the older deities' (p. 49). But the resentment has been played down as long as the threat to collective security continues, since group solidarity is necessary to meet external threat and since only a deity evolved in the spirit of collective solidarity can be an adequate unifying symbol to ensure this solidarity.

The presence of the colonial administration has the effect of increasing the need for collective security, since the colonial authority has taken away from the traditional authority and their peoples their right to exercise judicial or even non-legal violence. The exercise of judicial coercion and violence belongs solely to the colonial regime from now onwards, as the people of Umuaro are to learn when they wage war on the people of Okperri. But the worst forms of local insecurity such as those caused by the Abam slave-raiders are certainly over. It is not surprising that institutions evolved to ensure collective security begin to weaken when the threats which gave rise to them are no longer felt. And the effect of the superimposition of a higher authority with a greater power of coercive violence is to create a ferment in the structure of traditional authority itself. Specifically, the older gods of Umuaro accepted dominance of Ulu as long as the old power structure remained. But now,

with the imposition of a higher authority over Ulu, the minor gods see the situation as an opportunity to shake off an irksome hegemony. The resentment that lay dormant in pre-colonial days became active again. The speech in which Nwaka repudiates the right of Ulu to lead the clan expresses all this. The speech is made at a secret meeting attended only by Nwaka's partisans:

Nwaka began by telling the assembly that Umuaro must not allow itself to be led by the Chief Priest of Ulu. 'My father did not tell me that before Umuaro went to war it took leave from the priest of Ulu,' he said. The man who carries a deity is not a king. He is there to perform its ritual and to carry sacrifice to it. But I have been watching this Ezeulu for many years. He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all. His father, they said, was like that. But Umuaro showed him that Igbo people knew no kings.

We have no quarrel with Ulu. He is still our protector, even though we no longer fear Abam warriors at night. But I will not see with these eyes of mine his priest making himself lord over us. My father did not tell me that Ezeulu was king of Umuaro. Who is he, anyway? Does anybody here enter his compound through the man's gate? If Umuaro decided to have a king we know where he would come from. Since when did Umunchala become head of the six villages? We all know that it was jealousy among the big six villages that made them give the priesthood to the weakest. We shall fight for our farmland and for the contempt Okperri has poured on us. Let us not listen to anyone trying to frighten us with the name of Ulu. If a man says yes his chi says yes. And we have all heard how the people of Aniuta dealt with their deity when he failed them. Did they not carry him to the boundary between them and their neighbours and set fire on him? (p. 33)

This is a piece of demagoguery, to be treated with reserve. For instance, it is difficult to credit the view that the Chief Priest whose deity leads the people to war and protects them from external and internal insecurities does not have a strong voice in determining war policy. After all, if he refuses to perform the ritual functions of his priesthood, it is hard to see how his deity can be involved in action at all. The incitement against the authority of the Chief Priest is possible because the threat that made the founding of Ulu necessary has receded. Nwaka says as much. But traditional people are not so foolish as to base their institutions so narrowly. Indeed, Ulu's power is not tied only to the provision of security. His priest keeps the agricultural calendar and calls the biggest feast of the year, the Feast of the New Yam which ushers in the harvest season. So his protection of security is not only religious, political, military and ethical, but also economic, and extends to such things as the keeping of communal census. Nwaka's uncompromising attack is therefore a serious schismatic move indicative of the falling apart of the old collective

ideology. His charge of ambition is exaggerated, though there is no doubt that Ezeulu's conception of power is exorbitant.

A peacetime Chief Priest has less scope for extending his power. Ezeulu is unaware of the limitation of his power and of the precise nature of his priesthood as the expression of corporate rather than personal will. This is shown in his own soliloquy:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose the day. He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it was his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know who the real owner was. No! the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival — no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be. He would not dare.

Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as though his enemy had spoken it.

'Take away that word dare,' he replied to this enemy. 'Yes I say take it away. No man in all Umuaro can stand up and say that I dare not. The woman who will bear the man who will say it has not yet been born.' (pp. 3-4)

This is a dangerous speculation — as dangerous as Nwaka's demagogic incitement. Even though until he refuses to call the feast of the New Year the Chief Priest acts within his ritual rights and authority, in his mind he has already begun to assume for himself vast illegal powers that justify Nwaka's accusation. His thought is to prove father to his subsequent act. Though no overt action of his justifies the accusation of ambition, he has within him undoubted authoritarian urges at odds with the republican outlook of the people. So Nwaka's accusation cannot be dismissed out of hand, but is borne in mind, and lights up the subsequent action.

The authoritarian urge in Ezeulu contributes to the final crisis when a greater flexibility and devotion to the common weal would have eased the situation. Nwaka's appeal to the republican sentiment is an astute move, calculated to carry weight with an egalitarian people, as the people of Umuaro appear to be. Nwaka is aware of the mobile nature of the society, as well as its hierarchical features, but he chooses to emphasize the one and to ignore the other. The open attack on Ezeulu's authority, which would have been unthinkable in Okonkwo's Umuofia, becomes possible in Umuaro because under the combined pressure of the new colonial administration, the Christian Church and the new economic forces, the oracles and the priests are beginning to lose their hold on the

people. Nwaka's subversion of Ezeulu's power succeeds because of the encroaching changes which are working towards a realignment of relationships and a readjustment of attitudes.

Ulu's dominance in the structure of traditional power is itself a result of social change. It represents a certain centralizing trend somewhat at odds with the federalizing, segmentary political relationships of earlier times.

There is an ironic twist to the strategy that Ezeulu adopts in his attempt to come to terms with the reality of the colonial presence. The Chief Priest who, as a symbolic head, should be the rallying point of resistance to the colonial authority, is unwittingly an instrument for subversion of the traditional system. At Winterbottom's prompting, he sends his young son Oduche to join the Christians and attend the village school. Oduche is to become Ezeulu's 'eye' in the new situation. His reason is perfectly rational: one must change with the changing times. Several times this pragmatism finds outlet in a recurrent proverb: 'A man must dance the dance prevalent in his time' and more poignantly in the extended metaphor of the elusive bird. 'I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba,' he asserts. 'Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching' (p. 55). In other words, Ezeulu sees the strength of the new forces and is attempting to come to terms with them. With Oduche as a lookout in the enemy camp, the chief feels more secure. But as it turns out, this feeling proves illusory. Although Ezeulu is described by his creator as an intellectual, someone who goes to the root of things and thinks about why they happen, he is cast in the role of the archetypal philosopher-king whose broad vision and comprehensive outlook on the world are his strength and, at the same time, the main source of his tragic flaw.

In his delicate calculation to keep the old, traditional world apart from the new, alien world of the white man until he knows more about the nature of the latter, Ezeulu commits an error of judgement as a result of his blindness to a universal truth, namely, that no matter how one stands one cannot see *all* the sides of a dancing Mask. Ezeulu sends Oduche to the Christian Church, and the boy loses his sense of respect and fear toward the taboos of the clan. Unwittingly, the Chief Priest becomes the man who brings the proverbial ant-infested faggots into the hut and is surprised when lizards start to pay him a visit. Ezeulu is never tired of admonishing his people with the aphorism about the man who brings an ant-infested faggot into the house. But because of his own blind spot,

Ezeulu fails to recognize the ironic applicability of the saying to the way he tries to handle the question of the white man and his religion:

But now Ezeulu was becoming afraid that the new religion was like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants an embrace. Ezeulu had already spoken to his son who was becoming more strange everyday. Perhaps the time had come to bring him out again. But what would happen if, as many oracles prophesied, the white man had come to take over the land and rule? In such a case it would be wise to have a man of your family in his hand. (p. 51)

What Ezeulu is attempting here is a pragmatic accommodation of the future in the present. He not only foresees, he wants to forestall; but that is impossible. The present cannot accommodate the future; one has to give way to the other completely. Ezeulu likes to think that Oduche is in the Christian community as an uninvolved observer. But the situation admits of no such ambivalence. One is either serving the Christian God or the ancestral deity; he cannot owe allegiance to both at the same time. By sending his son to the mission, Ezeulu is inextricably compromised, whether he recognizes or admits it or not.

Oduche, the sacrificial offering to the new forces, precipitates the first of Ezeulu's crises. He becomes a Christian dihard, tries to suffocate a royal python, the totemic animal sacred to Idemili, and is found out. This heightens the ill will between the priest of Idemili and Ezeulu, their families, villages and partisans in the clan. Ezeulu's sending Oduche to school is, in the eyes of his enemies, part of his strategy for reinforcing his personal power by ingratiating himself with the British administration. Earlier, the good opinion of the District Commissioner, won by testifying against the clan in the land dispute with Okperri, had been chalked up by his enemies as Ezeulu's first open act of betrayal and proof of his ambition. His son's sacrilege now, five years later, revives the memory and bitterness of that betrayal. Taken together, the two events look like an attempt by the Chief Priest to reach a personal accommodation with the forces threatening the old social order. And this renders his motives suspicious and dishonourable to his enemies and disturbing to his friends. His best friend and kinsman, Akuebuo, finds it hard to reconcile Ezeulu's traditional role as protector of communal tradition with his implied attack on this heritage by sending his son to join the Christians. He expresses his doubts:

When you spoke against the war Okperri you were not alone. I too was against it and so were many others. But if you send your son to join strangers in desecrating the

land you will be alone. You may go and mark it on that wall to remind you that I said so. (p. 166)

The strain of ambiguity in *Ezeulu* is pushed to the fore by the shattering blow which is yet to fall. Although Winterbottom at times exhibits total ignorance of Igbo custom to an astonishing degree, he knows and tells Clarke that the Ibo man, when given a small chance to rule over his people, will not only become an instant tyrant but will arrogate all authority to himself. The captain has the example of the chief at Okperri to give as evidence, the petty chief who insists on being addressed as His Highness Obi Ikedi the First, and has all but declared himself Defender of the Faith. Winterbottom has decided to reward Ezeulu by appointing him Paramount Chief in pursuance of the colonial administration's policy of Indirect Rule. But the choice could not have been made at a less auspicious time than when the Chief Priest is taunted by his enemies as the creature of the British administration. Ezeulu's refusal to come running for a chieftainship from Winterbottom precipitates the crisis that culminates in Umuaro people's desertion of their god Ulu for the God of the Christians. Ezeulu's refusal to accept the chieftaincy is read differently by both his enemies and the administration. To the administration, the Chief Priest is a thankless fetish-priest; to his enemies in Umuaro, he arouses their suspicion when he calls a meeting of the elders to acquaint them with the summons from the District Commissioner. The meeting turns sour when Nwaka, Ezeulu's arch-enemy, delivers a long, caustic and heavily sarcastic speech in which he berates Ezeulu for what Nwaka considers a dangerous collaboration with the white man on whose side the chief priest had been during the war with Okperri and to whose school he has recently sent his son. Ezeulu's subsequent arrest and imprisonment pushes him to the thought of revenge, both personal and divine.<sup>1</sup> His incarceration at Okperri he regards as part of Ulu's grand design to avenge his priest and punish Umuaro. For with the chief priest in prison, the ritual sighting of the moon cannot be performed, and since the number of the moons declared seen by Ezeulu determines the time of harvest, the Feast of the New Yam has to be postponed.

Some critics have seen Ulu's direct involvement in the dispute as a clear vindication of Ezeulu's action against the villagers. G. D. Killam in *The Needs of Chinua Achebe* (1969)<sup>2</sup> does not think that Ezeulu is acting out of personal spite or the desire to avenge the insult to himself. Rather, says Killam, the Chief Priest and the whole of Umuaro are caught in a more

than human drama.<sup>3</sup> To support this view, Killam quotes Ezeulu's old friend, Akusobue, 'the only man in Umuaro who knew that Ezeulu was not deliberately punishing the six villages as some people thought. He knew that the Chief Priest was helpless; that a greater thing than *nk* was caught in *nk*'s trap' (p. 265). Be that as it may, the delay in harvesting the yams has hurt the people. In their desperation and confusion, the people turn to the Christian religion for salvation by sending their sons with yam offerings to the Christian harvest festival and thereafter harvest their crops in the name of their sons. Killam further quotes the moral that the people draw from Ezeulu's tragedy: 'To them the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors — that no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgement against his clan' (p. 287).

The question that Killam fails to ask is: what if Ulu had not intervened? Could Ezeulu have just skipped the two yams left and declared the Feast of the New Yam? Of course not. The real issue here is not divine intervention, but human motivation. The irony is that the critic makes the same mistake as the character he is attempting to exonerate.

A superficial reading of the novel and a literal interpretation of the role of Ezeulu as just a mere arrow in the bow of his god might give the erroneous impression that the Chief Priest is an amoral agent of the deity. Of course, Ezeulu himself believes this. As he tells the delegates sent to plead with him, 'I am the Chief Priest of Ulu and what I have told you is his will not mine ... this is not my doing. The gods sometimes use us as a whip' (p. 261). I will point out presently that this is a simplistic way of putting the essentially complex and ambiguous role of the Chief Priest. But to go back to Killam's interpretation: by relying heavily on Ezeulu's own analysis of the god's injunction, an analysis that can hardly be described as objective, Killam fails to recognize the necessarily ambiguous role of the god and other divine elements in the novel, and thus misses the central irony. In an interview with Lewis Nkosi, Achebe himself gives a clue to his intention in *Arrow of God*: 'I am handling a whole lot of ... more complex themes, like the relationship between a god and his priest ... and I am interested in this old question of who decides what shall be the wish of the gods, and ... that kind of situation.'<sup>4</sup> That, precisely, is the core of the ambiguity in the novel which must be analysed before any valid statement can be made about Ezeulu's motivation.



Achebe's enigma is posed right from the beginning with the lack of a precise definition of the nature and extent of the power of the Chief Priest. Are we to take the will of the Chief Priest as Ulu's (a position which Ezeulu assumes)? Judging from the words of Ulu, the answer clearly is no, for the deity implies that he has no need for human intermediary in the exercise of his divine prerogatives.

'Tai Nwanu!' barked Ulu in his ears, as a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent human child. 'Who told you that this was your own fight?'

Ezeulu trembled and said nothing.

'I say who told you that this was your own fight which you could arrange to suit you? You want to save your friends who brought you palm-wine he—he—he!' laughed the deity the way spirits do — a dry dilexical laugh. 'Beware you do not come between me and my victim or you may receive blows not meant for you! Do you not know what happens when two elephants fight? Go home and sleep and leave me to settle my quarrel with Ikemali who wants to destroy me so that his python may come to power. Now tell me how it concerns you. I say go home and sleep...' (pp. 240-41)

This is the assertion of what Ezeulu describes as his spirit side, and on the strength of it he renews his act of revenge against Umuaro. If, on the other hand, we believe, as Ezeulu also does in a sense, that the power of the Chief Priest is some kind of alliance between god and man, we have then to answer the inevitable question: where does one draw the line between the two wills and what order of priority does one give to them? The answer here, again, is that no human can accurately draw such a line. But, as we have seen, Ezeulu's presumption makes him believe that he is in some kind of holy alliance with Ulu, and with this conviction he weaves a pattern of doom for Umuaro and calls it nothing but divine justice. Actually, as M. J. Melamu rightly recognizes, Ulu's intervention is meant to shock Ezeulu back into an awareness of his true position in the cosmic order.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the warning is again lost on the chief priest.

Long before we hear the awful voice of Ulu, Ezeulu has been dreaming of his revenge. In prison at Okperri, we are told, his 'greatest pleasure came from the thought of his revenge which had suddenly formed in his mind as he sat listening to Nwaka in the marketplace' (p. 198). Having made up his mind and settled upon the method of reprisal, Ezeulu begins to interpret events from this personal angle. His decision to send Oduche to the mission school, the boy's attempt to kill the sacred python, Ezeulu's own recent imprisonment, all are seen by the Chief Priest as a mysterious but special divine ordering of forces to further his revenge. It is true that Ezeulu at one time considers the possibility of reconciliation

with the villagers, but that is no more than a passing thought. And since he is convinced of his personal justification he can afford to dally with magnanimity without necessarily planning to display it:

Behind his thinking was of course the knowledge that the fight would not begin until the time of the harvest after three moons. So there was plenty of time. Perhaps it was this knowledge that there was no hurry which gave him confidence to play with alternatives — to dissolve his resolution and at the right time form it again. Why should a man be in a hurry to lick his fingers; was he going to put them away in the raffia? (p. 240)

Ezeulu's almost sadistic delight in his revenge would account for his quick interpretation of Ulu's words to correspond to his own wishes. Nobody can deny Ezeulu's own suffering, but I think it is more of a measure of the ambiguity of his motivation. He loves the people, yet he compulsively helps to destroy them.

On the other hand, however, it would be equally naive to ascribe Umuaro's suffering only to Ezeulu's act of revenge. There is little doubt that Ulu himself is visiting the sins of the people on their heads. What Ezeulu and Killam confuse is the human revenge of the Chief Priest and the divine justice of the deity. They both forget that revenge is not justice but an unreasonable human retribution which has a way of getting out of proportion to the original offence and thereby constituting a new crime. Hence we hear Ezeulu lament that Umuaro's present suffering is not just temporary but will be for all time. Ironically, Ezeulu feels a sense of community with the people in their suffering for the result of his revenge, seeing his own participation in the general distress as part of his function as the priest who pays the debt of every man, woman, and child in Umuaro. But in his interpretation of the god's justice he temporarily forgets this responsibility and remembers only his power. He comes to look at divine justice through his flawed vision as something from which he is excluded because of his earlier rectitude in the war with Okperri. He errs fatally in thinking that the justice of the gods is visited only upon the guilty. He says to Ulu in effect, 'I have done no evil, therefore I must not suffer.' He fails to see that true justice is a mysterious order in which the sins of individuals within a community are visited on the whole community; an order in which the sins of the guilty are visited on all — guilty and innocent alike. Ezeulu defines justice in non-personal terms, calling on Ulu, 'Let justice be done — on others!' He forgets that far from being outside of this moral, if unfathomable order, far from being a mere spectator, a mere arrow in the bow of the deity, an unimplicated executioner,

he is the pivot on which the whole order rotates. He is the Chief Priest of Ulu. As Richmond Hathorn remarks, '... which of us is innocent? The gods must use the guilty to check the guilty and must employ the polluted to expunge pollution. After all, they have agents of no other kind. To their eyes, and to their eyes only, out of the tangle of earthly injustices emerges the divine design of justice itself.'<sup>12</sup> The incomprehensibility of the whole mystery of this order of justice remains with Ezeulu to the end. At his final tragedy he asks himself again and again,

... why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him, to strike him down and cover him with mud? What was his offence? Had he not divined the god's will and obeyed it? When was it ever heard that a child was scalded by the piece of yam its own mother put in its palm? What man would send his son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbour's hut and then unleash rain on him? Who ever sent his son up the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree? But today such a thing had happened before the eyes of all. What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things? ... (p. 286)

Actually it points to no such thing, at least not in the cosmic order. It is only a reaffirmation of things as they should be. Ezeulu comes to his *Quod Erat Demonstrandum* without proving all the equations. He has divined the god's will but only partially. He has tried to carry out Ulu's order but has failed to include himself in its execution. He looks at himself as the accuser but fails to see that he is also the accused. And without the recognition of this paradox there can be no proper grasp of the concept of justice and the proper role of the scapegoat, which is the office of Ezeulu.

The novel closes as it does with Ezeulu's dementedness because he fails to accept his own moral responsibility for the general sin of the clan. Ezeulu falls into excuses for his downfall when he should have regarded it as an opportunity for self-development. Ezeulu regards his own situation as basically a crime-and-punishment formula. Failing to recognize the crime, he ascribes the punishment to some malevolent machination of a god who abandons his priest in a panic. Although Ezeulu has sinned against the gods, his tragedy is not really a matter of crime and punishment, but a failure of moral self-recognition.

*Arrow of God* illustrates the classical situation of a house divided against itself which, with or without any assistance from an external force, must collapse. For as one character remarks in the novel, 'the house which the stranger has been seeking ways to pull down has caught fire of its own will' (p. 106). The action in *Arrow of God* centres around Ezeulu's

running battle against two threats to himself and his clan. As I have pointed out in the preceding pages, Ezeulu locks horns with reactionary elements within the clan who, for various reasons, want to displace him and the deity he represents from the long-established hierarchy of the village deities. This represents the internal front of the war, and the opposing forces are led by Nwaka. From the outside come the forces of the British colonial institutions represented by Winterbottom. Achebe carefully balances the two forces and the roles they play in the destruction of Ezeulu.

The external forces working against the traditional way of life seem already entrenched in *Arrow of God*. The local school and mission station, irreverent strangers like the catechist Goodcountry, and the white man's presence, all these may be seen as the tip of the iceberg. For underneath lie the internal divisions within Umuaro itself. The external forces have merely helped to undermine traditional confidence and to shake the sense of common purpose and solidarity which in the past constituted the spirit of traditionalism. Some of the lesser characters bear witness to these changes in matter-of-fact remarks which show that they are realistic enough to recognize that these changes are there to stay. A character, for example, sees Mr Wright's new road connecting Umuaro and the administrative town of Okperri as a part of the new forces that are transforming the old society:

Yes, we are talking about the white man's road. But when the roof and walls of a house fall in, the ceiling is not left standing. The white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road, they are all part of the same thing. The white man has a gun, a matches, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone. (p. 105)

The theme of contact and change is not carried by such overstatements but rather by the human drama, in which those deeply entrenched in the past attempt to adapt to the present.

As the representatives of the external forces that Ezeulu has to contend with, the administrative officers are portrayed in such a way that things can be seen from their point of view. The white characters are not however explored in any great detail, except in so far as they are one of the forces operating on the traditional culture and on Africans, as agents of change, in which role their ignorance of local customs becomes a functional part of the development of plot.

Achebe assumes this ignorance in his white characters. Their physical and social distance from the local people is considerable. Winterbottom's

official residence in Okperri, for instance, is called 'Government Hill' and is set up far away from where 'the natives' live. One of the most stringent colonial taboos is that which forbids serving officers 'undue familiarity' with colonial subjects. Captain Winterbottom, who conceives it as part of his duty to keep the administrative staff in line (like 'a school prefect'), takes steps to stop one of his junior officers from socializing with the local people and thus lowering himself 'in the eyes of the natives'. It is not surprising that his understanding of local life is a mixture of stereotyped colonial prejudices and ethnographic fallacies, such as that the 'ikenga is the most important fetish in the Ibo man's arsenal, so to speak', that 'One thing you must remember in dealing with natives is that like children they are great liars' and that 'the Ibos in the distant past assimilated a small non-negroid tribe of the same complexion as the Red Indians'.

Achebe does not set out to damage the administrative officers particularly, except by poking fun at their ignorance which is only matched by their conceit.

By standing above the traditional institutions, and especially by setting up a court (where he judges cases 'in ignorance') and so being the ultimate authority in the determination of evil-doing assessed largely by European common law, the District Commissioner becomes the innocent instrument of the disintegration of the traditional social order. By appointing non-traditional officials such as the irresponsible and corrupt court-messengers, and unrepresentative and pompous little tyrants like His Highness Obi Ikedi the First of Okperri, he unwittingly exacerbates the pains of transition from the traditional to the modern order. In the end, social change operates through individuals and if these are evilly disposed or crassly stupid, then the suffering involved in fundamental social and culture change is greatly increased.

It was mentioned at the beginning of this paper that the major conflicts in *Arrow of God* are built around Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Umuaro, who is caught up in the agony of power. Because of the internal divisions within the traditional framework, I have tried to show how Ezeulu's strategy, in his attempt to come to terms with the reality of the colonial presence, is misunderstood, whether wittingly or unwittingly, by both his friends and enemies. Ezeulu is cast in the role of ambiguous character no less by his own fascination with the nature of his power and the temptation to constitute himself into the dispenser of Ulu's will. The discrepancy between what he thinks and what his enemies and friends think are his

motives in trying to reach an accommodation with the colonial presence heightens the strain of ambiguity in Ezeulu.

Because of his superior intelligence, Ezeulu possesses a broad vision and a comprehensive outlook on the world. He is a master of the two opposing worlds, at least he thinks so, and his understanding of the dilemma posed by the conflicting claims of the worlds is epitomized in his remark, 'The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in the same place'. But it is precisely in this strength of broad comprehension that Ezeulu's total weakness lies. In his belief that the mask of the world can actually be seen in its entirety, he forgets that some phases of reality can never be known because of the limited capabilities of man. The ignorance of this fact, as well as the consequence of that ignorance, is inevitable in one form or another. Ezeulu rightly considers the conflict between the forces of tradition and that of the new order brought by the Europeans to be something larger than himself or anybody else — 'it was a fight of the gods', part of a central mystery of which he was but an instrument, the arrow in the bow of his god; but he allows this truth to conceal another fundamental truth, namely, that the instrument of war is not above the conflict. When the gods come to dispense judgement, it is brought by the Chief Priest and falls on him as well.

## NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1958). Subsequent page references to the novel will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses at the end of the quotation.
2. G. D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1969).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
4. Lewis Nkosi, 'Conversations with Chinua Achebe', *Africa Report*, IX (July, 1964), p. 21.
5. M. J. Melamu, 'The Quest for Power in Achebe's *Arrow of God*', *English Studies in Africa*, XIV (September, 1971), p. 230.
6. Richmond Y. Hathorn, *Tragedy, Myth, and Mystery* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 46-48 from where I took my interpretation of divine justice.

# Kirsten Holst Petersen

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## BEETHOVEN STRASSE, FRANKFURT

Set in surroundings saturated by history  
this town has none.

One day in 1944 wiped it out.

The tourist guide suffered acutely,  
boasting about the height of the glass and concrete banks,  
in both metres and yards  
and arranging them in an international hierarchy  
where they overshadowed both New York and Tokyo,  
and painfully forcing a sense of history  
onto reconstructed old houses,  
erected according to original plans and  
authentic photographs.

In this sleepy surviving street  
large old houses stare blindly at each other  
across budding trees and street-car  
on cobbled stones,  
a yellowing photograph  
fixed in the hot windless air,  
hiding its burden of guilt  
behind lace curtains,  
stubbornly asserting the world  
that was smashed.

On Sunday Mornings in a nearby town  
in cobble-stoned square  
by the Gothic cathedral  
local choirs capture the past  
in well measured four-voiced songs,  
and a small girl in national costume  
leans back as far as she can go

and sees a solitary bird crossing the church tower,  
reflecting its bomber shadow in her upturned eyes,  
and the choir singing rises to a crescendo  
and drowns the noise of screams under falling brick,  
and the still air soothes the tourist guide's pain  
at real old windows, hidden away in farm houses  
and reset in imitation walls,  
and resurrected clocks, still marking time.  
And fading photographs.

(EACLALS Conference, 1981)

## THE PIANO

It arrived early one summer morning  
just before the lilacs,  
but definitely after the tulips.  
It rolled leisurely up the garden path  
on its castor wheels  
clad in a woollen blanket  
to protect it from apple blossom  
and bird droppings.  
It didn't stop at the door,  
but calmly and deliberately  
turned itself on its end  
and marched straight into the room  
where it installed itself  
in the appropriate corner.

With the blanket off  
its dark, polished skin  
and pearly white teeth  
instantly made demands on the room  
and us.  
Vases, chandeliers and leather bound books  
were suddenly missing;  
its shiny surface



did not mirror the gold frames  
of calm landscapes,  
and coffee cups just don't tinkle in this room.  
In vain did it try to echo  
the firm footsteps of  
a proud patriarch  
or the muffled voices of hurrying maids.

And whom could we hire  
to act the dreamy young girl  
or the calm mature matron  
to sit on the embroidered stool  
with her hands delicately poised  
and her back straight and purposeful  
and where is the corridor  
down which the music floats  
past the linen room and the pantry  
to meet the peace of mind  
of the owner in the library?

Maybe I'll paint it yellow  
and stain its teeth red.

# Ritual of Fire

I watched them pull out the heavy-tailed reptile from the murky water. I watched its shape sprawled out on the bank of the canal bordering the creek. The others were watching it too — tense, anxious, all of us children. Our hearts palpitated. We looked around at each other, expectant, wondering what would happen next. Then the adults took over.

I cringed within: I imagined the beast curling up under my bed at night when I was fast asleep. I imagined it unwinding in the shape of an anaconda, inhabiting my dream — I continued to flinch.

Its board-stiff alligator's tail moved a little. I looked around, wondering if I was the only one who had seen this. Then I imagined water rising up in the air, a commotion all around: and waves and ripples, very wide, everywhere, suffocating me further.

'A fire!' one cried, sending out the inevitable signal.

'Yes, let's see if it is really alive!' another chanted.

Everyone talked about the fire with urgency. And the solitary man with the gun who had shot the reptile, stood aloof, as if he knew what would happen next, as if he regretted what he had done; and in his eyes I saw the burning, the roasting, that would now occur.

The tropical sun burned against my skin. I put a hand against my forehead to shield the intense glare, hoping for a shadow. Someone nudged me.

'Look! A real fire!' I cringed immediately as he forced a grimace, his lips awry. I looked up at the sun next, virulence all around.

I glanced at the aloof one, with the gun still by his side. The air smelled of gunpowder. An empty cartridge rested by his left foot like an omen. No one dared pick it up as would ordinarily happen: it was now his testimony of a deed done!

Still the shouts, with everyone forming a circle closer to the half-breathing, still palpitating beast.

'It's not dead yet!'

'It's not! It's not!' came the obvious cry and chorus.

I looked around once more, feeling the intense heat: the sun seeming to melt with the actual fire against the board-stiff tail of the twitching alligator. I watched it cringe and convulse as the flames ate into the hard skin, etching itself against the coarse flesh.

Eyes wide open I dreamt of the fire — at night — the same fire etching itself in my dreams. No! No! I wanted to shout with closed mouth, eyelids quivering.

More sun. More grimaces from time to time, the hard virulence registered everywhere in the village of my growing up.

Someone pushed me. I drew closer to the circle: still on the fringe nevertheless. I looked as the blaze rose up — almost against my own skin. And I thought of the alligator splashing water in frenzy: a wild commotion next, with waves hurled high in the manner of a veritable leviathan, overwhelming me totally.

The tail twitched again.

'Look!' came the warning and chorus.

'It's almost dead ... no!'

'Not dead! Almost dead!'

I drew closer — and with my back to him, the aloof killer of the beast, I imagined him cringing too: his face and the alligator's were one. His eyelids were the same knobby eyelids of the reptile. And I saw the two of them in the blinding haze of the sun, somersaulting, a white underbelly next as the bullet tore through the weeds and water and hit solid flesh, splattering corpuscles and sinews and mixing with water and mud.

The cry went up louder.

My lips puckered, words forced out — I was chanting too. And still the blinding, almost unendurable sun — like a sickness.

More somersaults. I wasn't sure if I was imagining this or actually seeing it. I looked up into the sky, hoping for a mirage appearance, a real world next.

Nothing happened.

And the shouts, still in unison.

Where was I?

The beating of water — and waves. Palpable beats everywhere, crowding the canal that formed part of the long creek that fringed the village. I longed for the aloof one to come and stop the ritual burning — for him to assert himself, to take command!

And then I saw smoke rising up, forming patterns of more formidable things everywhere. I looked down at the ground: hard, hard under my

feet. I kicked dust.

I spat. I studied the foam of spittle like the rain itself, hoping that the fire would be drenched almost miraculously.

Yet the tail twitched.

The cries increased, carrying far. More villagers, mostly women and children this time, joined the crowd. All wanted to take part in the ritual. And I longed for escape, for a place in which I could hide from the assault which I interpreted to be against me. But I was also part of the crucifixion: I was the hand that lit the match, the flame that etched itself against skin and flesh, I was also the board-stiff tail beating against water. And smoke curled up like a living thing; smoke was elemental as the breeze itself; it crossed water, hailed over weeds. I watched with more fulsome sun in my eyes. And I day-dreamed each moment I remained longer, watching, taking part vicariously in this exercise.

Water ... water; I yearned for it. I wanted the flames to be extinguished, I wanted the ritual to stop. But the gun boomed in my ears: it was the signal for the fire to rage further. Continuing conflagration in my mind, in my heart beats: in my viscera and bones. I was shot and torn limb by limb by everyone around.

'It's not dead!'

'No, not yet!'

'It is, it is ... it's no longer moving ... it must be dead!'

'Yes, completely dead!' cried another.

Voices resounding, like a storm — like a baboon's howl in the neighbouring forest. The trumpet call of distant birds as well, some mysterious. More cries, shouts of exultation everywhere.

My eyes opened wider. I looked at the dead beast's head, the eyes rolled in almost. Anger burned in me. I was impatient: why did it have to die? Why did it not keep being alive? Alive-alive-alive! I stamped my feet heavily against the hard ground. I cuffed against my sides, arms flailing next. Tears streamed down my cheeks. For how long I was doing this I wasn't really sure.

Then, as if awakened, I found everyone looking at me. What was the matter? What had happened? Embarrassed, I looked around, my head slightly lowered next. The sun began declining, like a conspirator, escaping after the deed was done.

I wanted to lift my head, upwards, to the clouds — to look again for the living image.

But I didn't. I was intimidated; and I kept digging holes into the rain-filled ground with a big toe, indifferent and in a daze all at once.

Eyes still holding me. Even the alligator's dead eyes, piercing holes into my flesh, my bones. Oh no-no-no!

Was he too looking, the aloof one with the empty cartridge at his feet?

And then I felt him — he was walking up, a heavy, palpable shadow, drawing closer. By my side next!

His hand touched mine, sending waves through me.

His voice next, something whispered.

All eyes still on me, the resounding silence with continuing reverberations: a million baboons and trumpet birds.

Dead beast, save me! Dead alligator, swim away from them. Take them all by surprise. Let the road be a river, let the stones be transformed into ripples! Let them drift away, one by one, swallowed by weeds! I yearned for this happening — my eyes closed, imagining.

He was still talking, whispering. I wasn't registering anything however. I was only aware of the alligator moving.

'It will be alright, it's dead...' he muttered.

'Is it?'

'Well, sorta ... it could be alive too ... in the creek ... you will see it there again,' he grinned.

I was distrustful now: I knew he was trying to make me feel good; yet his grin. And then the others — they began laughing, their sounds lashing against me. I wanted to run away. But he held on to my arms stiffly. I pulled heavily.

'No! You must listen!' he commanded.

Silence for a while.

I pulled again.

'Listen! Wait!' he repeated, his face a half-grimace; he was now the sun itself. I looked at the empty gun at his shoulder; it was like a living thing; it took on a mouth, a body. He invited me to touch it. I did.

He smiled.

'Ah, see — it's not really dead ... it's alive ... it can swim in the water. It can take over the entire canal, it can drift with the weeds. You must understand...' In a way he was pleading with me — which was all I was aware of.

The others watched warily; then they became totally resigned to what he was saying; hypnotized even.

I was merely glued to the barrels of the gun: this thing that could kill with one blast; that too was alive!

He smiled again. He let go my arm. I felt my legs moving — I was walking away from him, going home now.

I felt a million eyes on my back — all eyes of reptiles, of watery things. Alligators at my feet next. But I dared not stop. I merely rubbed my eyes for a moment, and continued walking. Then I felt more water, perspiration dripping to my neck. I cringed a little, without my lips puckered as before.

In the silence of the trees rustling, I could hear his voice, the ultimate crucifier, shouting to me, 'Everything'll be okay ... wait an' see! Yes, wait an' see!'

I wanted to turn around.

Was he talking to me?

But I didn't: I kept walking on, hurriedly now, with the wind blowing from across the far Atlantic, fanning my cheeks.

A hurl of wind next: a chorus of leaves rustling their musical magic. I felt relieved the farther I was from them. And I hurried on, with the million things following: I was carrying the elemental world with me, away from them, away from the village. I was like a Pied Piper with strange powers. Realizing this, I began to exult — laughing loudly.

More wind rustled, more leaves danced on the trees.

His words kept echoing in my ears: I was entering a narrow cave where I'd have everything, all the reptiles, to myself. I'd nurture them, protect them: they'd protect me too.

But amidst this I heard a loud boom. I saw that one living, but mystical thing, the gun, against me. And I knew that the ultimate crucifier was still laughing. And I imagined pulling my arm away from him in further frenzy. I was asleep now: the hard sun taking refuge behind the clouds, far away, but not without its glinting iridescence.

It took me days to get out of this oblivion. I remembered the talk after.

'You had a sun-stroke,' one said.

'No,' I denied. 'I can remember everything. That alligator ... is it really dead?'

'Yes,' came a quick laugh.

'Really?' my repeated question.

More laughter.

'What about him?'

'Who?'

'The one with the gun? They knew who I was talking about from the beginning.

'He's no longer with us. He has left us — the entire village. Just rumour mind you.'

I was surprised by this information. I cringed softly. They laughed again.

'Maybe he'll come back ... he will'

'Why did he leave?'

No one seemed to have an answer.

'Maybe he's afraid...' came a tentative reply.

'Afraid? Of what?'

More laughter.

I was looking into the canal, its murky brown mystery, its underwater turbulence. I knew that there would always be leviathans hurling themselves in and around; they'd splash about in my dreams turning them into nightmares. I'd want to run away from them, but I knew how trapped I'd be.

'You ... you're strange again ... just as before...'

'No ... no ... you do not understand...'

They were impatient with me. 'It's another sun-stroke ... a real illness,' they walked away, keeping distant as I knew, from then on.

And I spent the rest of that day looking out for the ultimate crucifier. I'd look into the canal, alone, looking at each brown and dark-headed thing, thinking it was an alligator surfacing again. I'd peer closely at each driftwood and expect movement, a commotion, all in a matter of seconds.

But I knew it would take a long time before something really happened. And when it did, when another alligator really surfaced, palpable as the gun itself, it would be elusive — like a blotch of shadow in the blinding haze of the sun.

# The Existentialist Dimension in the Novels of Jean Rhys

Since the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 the novels and short stories of Jean Rhys have enjoyed an extraordinary revival, while the authoress, herself, has managed to complement her work by two collections of short stories, *Tigers Are Better-Looking* and *Sleep It Off, Lady*, and by the unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*. It is one of the tragic ironies of life that her last work should be an unfinished autobiography because it seems that everything else she wrote was but a prelude to the 'real' life of Jean Rhys. Throughout her work we find a conscious attempt to explore personal experience in the mode of fiction. This subjective concern according to Louis James<sup>1</sup> is, indeed, her apology for writing. It is therefore only natural that the host of reviews and the two critical studies that have been published as a sort of compensation for the lack of previous response to her work should either try to see the work of Jean Rhys from the feminist angle (implicit in its subject matter) or interpret it in terms of the West Indian background of its author.<sup>2</sup> The criticism of Wilson Harris and those critics<sup>3</sup> influenced by him constitutes a third critical tendency, which has been highly perceptive and analytically illuminating, relying as it does on the original theories on imaginative creation which have been expounded by the Guyanese novelist and critic over the years.

However, it seems to me that a major dimension of Rhys's work has been neglected so far. Here I am thinking of the intrinsic development from an overridingly fatalist 'vision' to an existentialist treatment of this 'vision'. My thesis is that such a progression does actually take place, and I will illustrate this by referring to points of narrative technique and quotations from Rhys's novels. There is a major danger in this kind of approach, however, which must be emphasized right from the start. One of the essential 'warnings' expressed by Jean Rhys is that of the danger of categorization. Categories, although helpful, are permanent objects of



fear and representatives of repression to Rhys's heroines, and it is only to be expected that the anti-rationalist Rhys would not accept them as far as her own production was concerned. In other words, we should not be misled by the relativism of our own ordering and so mistake the secondary classification (whether it be that of the literary product or of criticism) for what it incompletely reflects, existence itself. Life is essentially a tragic experience, which cannot be 'boiled down' to any philosophical doctrine, a point accentuated by Rhys both in her work and in private interviews with her.

*Quartet* (the original British title was *Postures*) was Rhys's first novelistic attempt representing her version of the 'ménage à trois' with Ford and Stella Bowen. It followed her 'sketches of bohemian life' in the collection of short stories, called *The Left Bank & Other Stories* (1927). *Quartet* (1928) is fairly traditional in its realistic analysis of characters and incidents. But already in this novel, a third person narrative, the heroine's mind, becomes the focus of the whole story, and her inability to conform to the conventions of Western civilization and consequent predilection for the social outcast are prominent elements in her process of individuation. The strongly fatalist conception of 'Marya Zelli' is brought towards a tragic climax in the final section of the novel, where she, already deserted by her lover (Heidler = Ford), experiences a second rejection at the hands of her husband (Stephen) only to watch him leaving with another woman. This conclusion, as often noted, verges on romantic melodrama, and does, in fact, counteract the otherwise predominant preoccupation with a realistic analysis of the main character's mind. There is, however, a significant feature of *Quartet* that should be noted. Alongside the confessional honesty, evident in the application of the experiences with the Fords, we find a fictive 'covering-up' of all personal aspects with the implicit purpose of rendering a portrait of the desolate individual, caged in an alien and unsympathetic world, as is metaphorically stated by the image of the fox:

There was a young fox in a cage at the end of the zoo — a cage perhaps three yards long. Up and down it ran, up and down, and Marya imagined that each time it turned it did so with a certain hopefulness, as if it thought escape was possible. Then, of course, there were the bars. It would strike its nose, turn and run again. Up and down, up and down, ceaselessly.<sup>4</sup>

This 'Sisyfox' may serve as an adequate emblem of the main character of *Quartet*. The paradox of confession alongside fictitious 'covering-up' was to remain a persistent feature of Rhys's work, and it served a specific

function. Whilst preserving at least the possibility of universalization of personal experience, and yet not denying the particularity of the latter, it pointed towards a potential general significance. In this way, the whole work became neither classicist nor romantic, but deliberately both.

In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) the main character, Julia Martin, was to carry on those traits previously attributed to Marya Zelli, just as other characters are easily identifiable reiterations and elaborations of those found in *Quartet* (see e.g. Mackenzie = Heidler). It is typical of Rhys's early novels that, generally, she works with a set of stock characters who are drawn from her own life and whose complexity increases in each successive novel. Basically, there is not much development to be seen in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* although a couple of new characters widen our perception of the heroine's background. The very movement of the narrative, from Paris to London and back to Paris, indicates the central image of the novel, that of the cycle, representing the circular movement of existence, in which progressive development is only carving out the essence of past experiences. This fundamental 'vision' of the novel is brought home from the beginning, where the drifting Julia accidentally sees the picture of

a male figure encircled by what appeared to be a huge mauve corkscrew. At the end of the picture was written, 'La vie est un spirale, flottant dans l'espace, que les hommes grimpent et redescendent très très sérieusement'.<sup>5</sup>

Julia is obsessed with reflections of the past, always representing something lost, the way it was lost, and leading us to the resulting circularity of the present. An element of guilt occurs in Julia's self-conception. The childhood story of the butterfly (pp. 115-6) is thus a non-mythological re-telling of the story of the Fall containing all the traditional elements in the unavoidable existential alienation from nature (i.e. possessiveness — self-conscious action — self-legitimation when blamed — feeling of guilt and regret — and finally, the pervading fear of nothing (*Der Angst*). This guilt dimension does not disturb the general pattern, depicting Julia as a victim of determinant factors. As in the Christian doctrine of Original Sin the Fall cannot be evaded. The feeling of geographical and cultural estrangement in Europe is hinted at by the story of the Brazilian mother, which is a variation of the West Indian theme of *Voyage in the Dark*, but it is obvious that this estrangement is only part of a much more radical existential desorientation as far as Julia is concerned. Furthermore, she is very much aware of what she is being reduced to within the social context, but apart from momentary

outbursts against her own predicament her domineering passivity makes her accept the suffering involved even to the extent at times of seeing a possible release as being conditioned by her ability to suffer:

And I was there, like a ghost. And then I was frightened, and yet I knew that if I could get to the end of what I was feeling it would be the truth about myself and about the world and about everything that one puzzles and pines about all the time. (ALMM, p. 41)

Being at odds with life and with the others is not only a negative tension, and Julia is able to see the ambiguity of her position, in this way also drawing strength from the contrariness:

Of course, you cling on because you were obstinate! You cling on because people tried to shove you off, despised you, and were rude to you. So you cling on. Left quite alone, you would have let go of your own accord. (ALMM, p. 130)

*Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Rhys's own favourite novel, is really an education novel, technically and thematically deepening perceptions made before. In this novel it becomes clear that the different social roles of the heroine must be subsumed under the existential fatality vision! The poor, female outcast in a man's world and the West Indian's estranged life in England represent ways of being that disclose the inevitably tragic dimension of life itself. The novel is about Anna Morgan's initiation into the world of England and into adulthood. These two initiations parallel one another and are repeated twice, bringing out the central idea of life's deception. The 'voyage' symbolically refers to Anna's subjective existence, and it presupposes the idea of a ship, standing for all the determinant factors of her existence, whether they be social, economic, or genetic. The 'dark', the spatial dimension, in which the 'voyage' takes place, principally represents England, but on a more general level also the West Indies, for to Anna these contain the embryo of the conflicts she will eventually experience in England. This is made clear by the fusion of past and present events, whenever Anna undertakes a psychological regression to her childhood.

*Voyage in the Dark* marks a significant development in narrative technique. We now have a first person narrator, indicative of a growing degree of internalization. This is further substantiated by innovation in the depiction of the main character. In her attempt to penetrate the psychology of her heroine Rhys applies a stream-of-consciousness technique that enables her to fuse impressionist, expressionist, and surrealist devices in order to create a maximum of what I would call *psychological*

realism. One major example must be singled out because in a concentrated form it brings together the essential ideas of the novel. Existence is primarily tragic and filled with deceptions, and as it is a process, all retreat is futile, and so is all compensation. Religion (in the shape of 'the boy bishop') is there because of the tragedy of existence, which in turn defines the compensatory function of religion, making it inadequate as compensation by its very nature, and pointing towards the basic experience of the absurdity of life:

I dreamt that I was on a ship. From the deck you could see small islands — dolls of islands — and the ship was sailing in a doll's sea, transparent as glass.

Somebody said in my ear, 'That's your island that you talk such a lot about'.

And the ship was sailing very close to an island, which was home except that the trees were all wrong. These were English trees, their leaves trafficking in the water. I tried to catch hold of a branch and step ashore, but the deck of the ship expanded. Somebody had fallen overboard.

And there was a sailor carrying a child's coffin. He lifted the lid, bowed and said, 'The boy bishop', and a little dwarf with a bald head sat up in the coffin. He was wearing a priest's robes. He had a large blue ring on his third finger. 'I ought to kiss the ring', I thought in my dream, 'and then he'll start saying *in nomine Patris, Filii...*'

When he stood up the boy bishop was like a doll. His large, light eyes in a narrow, cruel face rolled like a doll's as you lean it from one side to the other. He bowed from right to left as the sailor held him up.

But I was thinking, 'What's overboard?' and I had that awful dropping of the heart.

I was still trying to walk up the deck and get ashore. I took huge, climbing, flying strides among confused figures. I was powerless and very tired, but I had to go on. And the dream rose into a climax of meaninglessness, fatigue and powerlessness, and the deck was heaving up and down, and when I woke up everything was still heaving up and down.<sup>4</sup>

Like previous heroines Anna Morgan is a victim of fate, to be understood as conditioning in the widest sense of the term. And like the others she is continually being overpowered by fate, which is constantly threatening to disintegrate ('drown') her, both physically and spiritually.

In *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) the application of the interior monologue (stream-of-consciousness) technique is carried to an extreme. The great extent of internalized analysis of the main character makes this novel the most subjective of all. We find a constellation of two natural cycles, that of day and that of human life, and, as usual, the emphasis is on the tragic absurdity of existence, in which moments of happiness and beauty are only painful reminders of the dominant experience of loss. But the female heroine, Sasha Jansen, is a much more composite

character than those we have seen before. She has been brought to Paris (the scene of her youth with its happiness and failures) for a fortnight, and through the nine days we follow her she re-experiences rejections on both private and social levels with an almost ritualistic precision. She is now locked in a conflict between prevailing disillusion and illusive hope, reflected in the symbolic value attached to the problem: Will tomorrow ever come? The process of life itself makes it impossible for her to remain in a kind of 'Buddhist' 'heaven of indifference' (p. 76); life is commitment, and this makes the self-legitimizing philosophy of detachment that Nicholas Delmar represents inadequate. Still Sasha finds herself completely desolate:

I have no pride — no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere. Too sad, too sad ... there I am, like one of those straws which floats round the edge of a whirlpool and is gradually sucked into the centre, the dead centre, where everything is stagnant, everything is calm.<sup>3</sup>

Although Sasha has no optimism either on the personal or political levels about eventual basic changes of existential conditions, there are, however, different ways of handling the overwhelming problem of the power of fate (the power of conditioning). Through her acute self-awareness she is able to see herself actively partaking in bringing about the tragedy of human existence, and thus the portrait of the female heroine as primarily (and almost exclusively) a victim becomes less prominent than was the case in *Voyage in the Dark*. There are no metaphysical consolations, but the acknowledged guilt has a major importance as far as human relations are concerned. The sequence in which Sasha is playing her game with the gigolo, who is in turn playing his game with her, clearly illustrates that self-possession does, in fact, counteract the wish of security that motivates it; i.e. life is essentially insecure. To apply Heidegger's terminology:<sup>4</sup> The human being is living *ein uneigentliches Leben* (and this is guilt), but called back by his/her own conscience (out of a *Vorverständnis vom eigentlichen Leben*) he/she is momentarily capable of leaving behind all securities and lives in *Hingabe* (unconditioned devotion). This is exactly what Sasha does when after the break-down of the relationship with the gigolo she manages to accept 'the man in the dressing-gown', who is both an emblem of the enemy and in his relationship with Sasha an interpretation of the origin of enmity:

He doesn't say anything. Thank God, he doesn't say anything. I look straight into his eyes and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time... Then I put my arms round him and pull him down to the bed, saying: 'Yes-yes-yes...'<sup>5</sup>

The universal existential significance of this episode is illustrated by way of contrast with another episode in *Good Morning, Midnight*, in which the painter, Serge Ruben, blames himself for not having been able to react in the same way to a Martinique girl he had once met in London. Determinant factors are no less determinant because of this, but the closing section clearly indicates that there are possibilities of choice enclosed within the determined predicament, possibilities that can be used or abused, but which are experienced as possibilities, whether they are so or not, by the individual. It is worthwhile noticing that after *Good Morning, Midnight* Jean Rhys almost completely disappeared from the literary scene not to appear until 27 years later with an objectification of past insights.

The story of her rediscovery and that of the successful publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been told before so I will only add a few points of direct relevance to my general argument in view of the extensive critical literature on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novel represents a new departure as far as the narrative technique and the whole scope of the story are concerned. It renders a dramatic juxtaposition of the relationship between the West Indies and England on all levels. Although the specific conflicts within the West Indian context are carefully delineated, and thus nothing is lacking as to particularity, this historical novel transcends its own particularization to pose a general ontological problem, i.e. that of the individual's handling of the determinant factors within his or her own existence. Rochester, on the one hand, willingly obeys the codes and standards that have been taught him, and when he is confronted with the one fundamental trial of his life (meeting otherness), he fails. Fascinated by Antoinette and the West Indies in general he still maintains a rational distrust, to which he can fully resort once the fascination is tinged by threats inherently present in the spiritual and physical contexts. His life serves as an adequate symbol of hopeless and existentially reductionist rationalism such as has been a continual feature of European civilization. In other words Rochester conforms to the conditioning of his own predicament, and in his case psychological repression and consequent frustration are unavoidable: 'She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it.'<sup>12</sup>

Antoinette, on the other hand, undergoes a more dynamic development. Her life consists of vain attempts to find security. At an early age she realizes that feeling safe is a thing of the past, and whether she is trying to find protection by crawling close to the walls of 'Coulibri', seeking refuge in the convent, or fulfillment in love at 'Granbois', fate betrays her. In Thornfield Hall, safe as the prison it is, she is finally con-

fronted with what the conditioning of her own predicament has made her — 'a ghost': 'It was then that I saw her — the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her' (WSS, p. 154).

Through her three dreams Antoinette has gradually and intuitively been initiated into the must of her own position. At the very bottom of her own desolation she takes the burden of her existence upon her shoulders, in this way not evading fate, but transcending it by a deliberate destruction of what it has made her. We thus see an important distinction between fate as a general, objective accumulation of conditioning factors and 'my' fate as a subjective usurpation of fate in action. Whether one interprets this action from a 'positive' angle, as Wilson Harris does when he sees *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a variation of universal myths of creation<sup>11</sup> (a point of view which is supported by the dense symbolism of the novel) or from a 'negative' angle, as is the case with Dash,<sup>12</sup> who sees it in terms of the final delusion, tragically substantiating the power of fate in Antoinette's case, remains a matter of choice. Personally, I would prefer the tension between these two by pointing to the aspect of an agnostic cry for redemption, either heard or unheard — who knows?

## NOTES

1. See Louis James, *Jean Rhys* (Longman, 1979), p. 13.
2. Thomas Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* (Texas University Press, 1979) is primarily concerned with the feminist aspect of Rhys's work, while Louis James, op. cit., focuses on Rhys's West Indian background.
3. Wilson Harris, 'Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', in *Kunapipi*, Vol. II, No 2 (Aarhus, Denmark, 1980) and Flemming Brahm & Hanne Nielsen, 'Retrieval of a Monster: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*', in *Enigma of Fatales*, ed. by Kirsten Holm Petersen & Anna Rutherford (Dangaroo Press, Aarhus, Denmark, 1975).
4. *Quartet* (Penguin, 1977), p. 124.
5. *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (Penguin, 1977), p. 13.
6. *Voyage in the Dark* (Penguin, 1975), pp. 140-1.
7. *Good Morning, Midnight* (Penguin, 1975), p. 58.
8. The existential categories here applied have been freely adapted from the philosophical works of the German existential ontologist Martin Heidegger.
9. *Good Morning, Midnight* (Penguin, 1975), p. 159.
10. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Penguin, 1976), p. 141.
11. See the essays mentioned in note No 3.
12. V.M.L. Dash, 'Jean Rhys', in Bruce King, *West Indian Literature* (MacMillan, 1979).

# The Year That Was

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## AUSTRALIA

Early on in Murray Bail's award-winning first novel *Homenickness* (Macmillan), there's a witty echoing of the desire Patrick White professed in 1958 to give the Australian novel the textures of paint and music, and to reject what he saw as its journalistic 'realism'.

Bail centres on a group of tourists on that Australian institution, the World Discovery Tour:

It could almost have been their own country — the colours were as brown and parched; that chaff-coloured grass. Ah, this dun-coloured realism. Any minute now the cry of a crow or a cockatoo.

He rejects both the style of the social realists and what have long since become the mannerisms of White's writing too. And yet despite its snappy inventiveness, *Homenickness* is finally a prisoner of its own style.

Grand Touring offers Bail full scope for the clever and comic imagery that distinguishes his short stories: the tourists visit a museum of pygmies, the museum of corrugated iron, the brilliant Institution of Marriage, and so on. As in Margaret Atwood's museum-piece *Life Before Man*, the intellectual appeal is strong, and the author's cool detachment necessary to it. But the narrative lacks an emotional dimension to draw the reader onwards. True, it's not Bail's intention to have us involved with his characters; rather, with situations and ideas. But in consequence the reader may find them only bearable for intermittent excursions, and read *Homenickness* as if it were more a collection or a catalogue than a single narrative.

That's not true of the other highly-praised novel this year, Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (Macmillan), though a preoccupation with manner is again noticeable. In this expatriate's novel of two Australian girls and love in transit, Hazzard manages, despite some quite complex plotting, to compel the reader's attention with her compassion for her characters and with a classic craftsmanship that seems to offer in almost every second sentence some discovery in observation or style.



If *The Transit of Venus* makes the tag 'unjustly neglected' now inappropriate to Shirley Hazzard, it clings to the prolific novelist and print-maker Barbara Hanrahan. (The Australian critics' track record with female stylists isn't good: Christina Stead, Thea Astley, Eve Langley, Miles Franklin...)

*The Frangipani Gardens* (U.Q.P.) is Hanrahan's sixth book, and in it she returns to her theme of the traumatic birth from childhood into adulthood. It's a novel of complex surfaces set above a gaping and terrifying abyss. The ritual of naming, of chanting the past is important as the writer reaches for it: Adelaide, 1927, the Duke and Duchess of York, the Floating Palais, satin de sole, crêpe de Chine ... Hanrahan loves the word 'soursob' (and who can blame her?) carnations, Betty blue. Here you find the total and consciously claustrophobic recall of childhood that you find in *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* and, finally, in *A House for Mr Birnam*. And the grotesque shock of losing it.

The pastels, the fine textures and floral embellishments of a Hanrahan print play against the lurid red gash of a mouth or the grossness of a fluidy-fat pair of female legs, and this tension is reflected in her writing style. A distinctive and pleasing writer — perhaps for some readers varying too little from one novel to the next — Barbara Hanrahan deserves closer attention.

Her attractive feyness and preoccupation with innocence, if not here her rich verbal embroidery, are shared by Randolph Stow in *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (Secker & Warburg). In style far more accessible than Stow's previous novel *Vivants*, *The Girl Green as Elderflower* is remarkable for the hauntingly simple handling of its mysteries and for its resolution of the alienation that has almost been obsessive in Stow's work.

Set in Suffolk and virtually laying aside Australian subject matter, the novel interweaves present narrative and retellings of 12th century fertility legends. With his central character Crispin Clare as an outsider suffering the shellshock of colonial experience, and becoming initiated into the mysteries of the landscape-with-a-past, Stow takes up here where he left off with Rick Maplestead at the end of *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* and writes a novel that might compare interestingly with David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*.

Whereas Stow's move away from 'matter of Australia' is a natural consequence of his having lived in England for so long now, Thomas Keneally's is clearly an artistically and politically motivated choice. While Hollywood has long felt free to give American accents to Cleopatra, talking apes and even sundowners, the business of playing

Amerikans has not been for others to take lightly. So his *Confederates* (Collins) is a characteristically daring venture and on the whole successful.

Understandably, Keneally's been careful with his research, but a bit too careful. While his dramatic retelling of the Civil War and his management of a cast of thousands are remarkable, *Confederates* inevitably lacks the close and persistent focus on a single mind that marks Keneally's best writing.

Successful publication in the extensive American and British markets, which a few Australian writers such as Keneally have managed, of course has a price. And with the multiplication factor of British book prices in Australia currently a scandalous 3.7 (a paperback originally 80p. becomes \$A2.95!) resistance to hardback fiction prices grows steadily towards some crisis. Keneally's novel in magazine format, *The Cut-Price Kingdom* (Wildcat Press) is a bold attempt to reverse that trend, but although it's a well-written and well-promoted popular novel of political intrigue set in Australia of the Second World War, the experiment seems to have been only moderately worthwhile in commercial terms.

Other novels during the year were more rewarding, but less significant in relation to the particular writer's development. The best of these, Barry Hill's *Near the Refinery* (McPhee & Gribble) is a short novel that reveals the same eye for a good story evident in his collection *A Rim of Blue*. In a plain and laconic style that is only marred by one forgivable authorial intrusion, Hill probes two taboos: the sexuality of pubescent girls and that of old men.

Jessica Anderson's *The Impersonators* (Macmillan), too, treats a difficult subject: the effect of money on human nature. Beginning with a situation that is reminiscent of *The Eye of the Storm*, Anderson brings a far closer focus than White does to bear on these ordinary people, but the novel gathers its power too slowly because of it. And that potentially lethal combination of ordinariness and close focus is, for me, the problem presented by Helen Garner's novellas *Honour & Other People's Children* (McPhee & Gribble). But it's clearly not a problem for other readers. Reviewers' opinions of this book polarise as they did over her first novel, *Monkey Grip*; and that's something of a cult book now...

The year's best short story collection is *Summer Ends Now* (U.Q.P.) by John Emery, a writer already known as the author of screenplays for Phil Noyce's films *Backroads* and *Caravan Park*. Emery here tends away from the urban/suburban orientation of most recent Australian short stories so that the narrator shifts restlessly between the city and the backblocks

as Lawson did. There's passion beneath the laconic surface of these stories waiting to burst through, and the resulting tension gives them a distinct and unpredictable menace which is becoming a persistent theme in Australian literature, particularly in the new drama.

This kind of tension gathers and finally breaks in the book that dominates the year's work in poetry: Les Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (A & R). Two unemployed city boys steal from the undertaker's the body of an old digger, Clarrie Dunn, and head north from Sydney to give Clarrie a burial on his home ground: the farm country in from the north coast of New South Wales. The story is told in 140 sonnets, and it's a good one, with Murray's wit, his observation and ear frequently at their best.

But the appeal of this (*got it??*) 'novel sequence' is not as immediate as that of Murray's earlier collections. He's taking on a difficult job, admittedly, in trying to bring narrative and verse form together again. But complications of plot and symbolism, the ritualistic heightening of rhetoric, and the increasingly mysterious laconics of Murray's vernacular combine to make the reading unnecessarily tough going at times, and persuade me that the form Murray has chosen, however well handled, has been an interesting challenge and a rigorous discipline but finally quite arbitrary. That said, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* still urges more than a second reading.

The other outstanding collection this year is David Malouf's *First Things Last* (U.Q.P.). His work here is more quietly thoughtful than Murray's and manages an intriguing sometimes surreal balance between concrete details of a past warmly recalled, and the abstractness of a strangely airy dream landscape. Every piece in this short book is worth having.

Less distinctive but a solid collection nevertheless is Geoff Page's *Cassandra Paddocks* (A & R). Coming as they do out of tableland and high plain country, his poems are probably disadvantaged by a tempting comparison with David Campbell's. Inclined to be set indoors, Page's poems are rather sombre and lack the exuberance of open spaces and the sense of humour characteristic of the older poet. But their awareness of the past and of the family (even though some tire of that in Australian poems) and their quiet and precise observation are attractive.

There's a slow-moving elegance about his style that once identified Chris Wallace-Crabbe's poetry, but in *The Emotions Are Not Skilled Workers* (A & R) Wallace-Crabbe shows how far he has moved beyond that. Repeatedly concerned about the relationship between passion and

intellect, he's an eclectic poet, moving easily between a sequence about young boys at Gallipoli and a hymn to underwear.

*The Eating Tree* (A & R) is a surprise from Mark O'Connor which adds another dimension to John Forbes's plea for 'the real Mark O'Connor' to stand up (*Australian Literary Studies* New Writing issue 1977). This collection wisely puts aside the tricky but derivative formal games of his first book, *Reef Poems*, but a good deal of it draws on O'Connor's experiences in Europe rather than on the source of his best poetry, the Great Barrier Reef. When he does write closer to home later in this collection, as in 'Turtles Hatching', the work fully justifies and now makes irrelevant the epithet frequently applied to his early poems, 'promising'.

John Forbes himself has produced some of the most memorable of the variable 'New' Australian poetry (notably his '4 Heads and How To Do Them'). His third volume, *Stalin's Holidays* (Transit Poetry) captures, as its witty dustjacket does, Forbes's Australia: menace in a flip Hawaiian shirt. The intelligence, the humour, the absurd nightmare images, the rhythmic control are attractive; the nihilism isn't.

Two poets finally who've become increasingly interesting. John Blight's poetry changed dramatically with a move away from earlier poems about the sea in *Hart*, and here in *The New City Poems* (A & R) he consolidates that change with his often quirky imagery and subject matter. Engaging because of its willingness to chance direct personal address and an almost flat plain style, this book would have been strengthened by cutting where the poetry falls prey to the risks involved.

And Judith Rodriguez who, as she did in *Water Life*, complements the poems with her own linocuts in *Mudcrab at Gambaro's* (U.Q.P.) is interesting for strong personal poems, well crafted and only marred by an occasional defensive brusqueness of tone.

*Travelling North* (Currency) is the year's best play and next to *The Club* the most satisfying David Williamson has written. Predictably, it's become fashionable to knock him for his commercial success (rather than praise him for putting burns on seats for Australian plays in so few years). But he can afford to laugh: the reviewers also reserve the right to condemn Dorothy Hewett for her lack of it. In *Travelling North* Williamson forces the critics to adjust the formula they've established for his plays in at least two respects: he writes in Frances a fully and sympathetically developed part for a woman; and he focuses not on the young but on the middle aged.

Although best known as a novelist and short story writer, Barry Oakley demonstrates in *The Great God Magadon and Other Plays* (U.Q.P.) his

more recent commitment to and success in the theatre. The familiar Oakley combination of zany humour and anguish makes all the plays here very good, but in particular the title piece and 'Scanlan'. During the year a brilliant interpretation by actor Max Gillies of this play in the form of a lecture on Henry Kendall proved 'Scanlan' to be the most popular Australian one-hander since Ron Blair's *The Christian Brother*.

And then several important critical publications. Ian Reid's thorough and illuminating comparison of Australian and New Zealand novels in *Fiction of the Great Depression: Australian and New Zealand 1930-1950* (Edward Arnold) is a provocative book and will hopefully stimulate the kind of comparative studies that should have followed J.P. Matthews' *Tradition in Exile* but for various reasons didn't. Shirley Walker's *The Poetry of Judith Wright* (Edward Arnold) is a useful study of the relationship between Wright's art and her philosophy, though this focus can lead her to questionable evaluations of particular poems.

A new edition of Barbara Baynton's stories (which ought to be read more often than they are alongside Lawson's) by Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson, *The Portable Barbara Baynton* (U.Q.P.) makes valuable and important corrections to previous biographical knowledge of Baynton. The inclusion of her largely unreadable novel *Human Toll*, however, shows her growing reputation to have been well-served by the brevity of the standard *Bush Studies* collection.

*Australia's Writers* (Nelson), the first volume of Graeme Kinross-Smith's compendium of photographs, biographies and interviews is sometimes interesting for its publication of little known and new pictorial material, but the tone of its text falters and is neither on the one hand scholarly enough, nor on the other, popular enough, to be satisfying. Disappointing, as it may pre-empt a better book for some time.

And disappointment is one of the themes of the year's best critical book, but it's presented by Axel Clark in an exemplary manner. *Christopher Brennan: a Critical Biography* (Melbourne U.P.) is a portrait of failure, of a tragic literary figure in the dimensions Harpur and Kendall aspired to. Indeed this study of what Kendall called 'the lot austere / That ever seems to wait upon / The man of letters here' may suggest Brennan not as the first significant modern but the last and greatest of the colonial poets in Australia. Clark's sympathetic but rigorously critical integration of the life and the work make Brennan newly interesting in a way that the poetry alone is not always able to do; and puts to rest the lingering suspicion that Brennan is no more than a Sydney University industry.

MARK MACLEOD

Mordecai Richler's *Joshua Then and Now* (McClelland & Stewart) and Hugh MacLennan's *Voices in Time* (Macmillan) have been the most talked about books of 1980. Since 1959, when MacLennan's *The Watch That Ends the Night* won the Governor General's Award over Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, these two writers have been important figures on the Canadian literary scene. It will be interesting to see how the decision goes this year.

Although *Joshua* is clever, accomplished and funny in places, it failed to compel my attention in the way *Voices* did. It's impossible to avoid a feeling of *déjà vu* when reading about Joshua Shapiro, a successful, middle-aged Jewish journalist happily married to a rich and beautiful WASP, yet determined to shatter the fragile shape of his achievements. We've read it all before in *St Urbain's Horseman*. Yet it could be argued that *Joshua* embodies a more mature and humane moral vision than its predecessor. The expatriate perspective has been left behind, its moving ending is far more positive than anything in *Horseman* and there are reconciliations not only between husband and wife but also between father and son. The weaknesses — an excessive reliance on stereotypes, an episodic structure, the reappearance of stale jokes and stock situations — may well be perceived as virtues by a Richler fan, for they characterize most of his work. *The New York Times Book Review* named this one of the ten best novels of the year.

*Voices in Time* is also set in Montreal, but in a Montreal of the future, re-named Metro after 'safe' (non-nuclear) bombs have destroyed the world. This future setting enables MacLennan to view the present as history and to juxtapose Canada of the '60s and '70s against Hitler's Germany. The story emerges through the reminiscences of an old man, John Wellfleet, as he attempts to sort out the written records left by his German step-father, Conrad Dehmel, and by his cousin, a Canadian T.V. journalist, Timothy Wellfleet. This form underplays MacLennan's weaknesses in presenting dialogue and in creating convincing women while it allows his greatest strength, his compelling elegiac strain, to show to advantage. *Voices in Time* is MacLennan at his best.

Jane Rule's *Contrast with the World*, although more soberly written, reminds me of Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, for it too focusses on a group of people in an urban setting as they struggle to make their individual 'contracts with the world'. The six sections devoted to six different characters are uneven in interest, but the effect of the whole is complex

and engaging. Like Richler and MacLennan, Rule questions the direction in which she sees our society moving by creating a work of art which provides an alternative vision.

The most controversial first novel of 1980, Susan Musgrave's *The Charcoal Burners* (McClelland & Stewart), is as far as it's possible to go from the human didacticism of Richler, MacLennan and Rule. Instead, it offers a flirtation with the fascination of evil: surrender to violation and psychosis. I found it pretentious and unconvincing, yet it has a disturbing power to disconcert which demands recognition.

It's been a disappointing year for poetry. At least three writers best known for their poetry have chosen to publish prose this year. Musgrave's novel may be seen as a new development of an expanding talent, but Earle Birney's *Spreading Time: Remarks on Canadian Writing and Writers. Book I: 1904-1949* (Véhicule) and Robert Kroetsch's *The Crow Journals* (NuWest) are mere excuses for books, scrappy collections of notes about their lives. That same tendency to look backward that we saw in Richler and MacLennan is evident here. Birney's book reveals something about Canadian cultural life during his period, but nothing about his own creative processes or personal life. Although repetitive and poorly organized, it can be provocative. Kroetsch's book is bland and boring. These are the journal entries made during the five years he worked on his novel, *What the Crow Said*. All the humour, energy and discipline of the novel are absent here.

The year's fondness for retrospection is also evident in the number of volumes of collected poems now appearing. Among them are Tom Marshall's *The Elements* (Oberon), *Collected Poems of Raymond Souster. Vol. 1. 1940-55* (Oberon), Fred Cogswell's *A Long Apprenticeship: Collected Poems* (Fiddlehead Poetry Books), and Len Gasparini's *Breaking and Entering: New and Selected Poems* (Mosaic Press/Valley Editions).

The larger publishing firms seem to be abandoning poetry to the smaller, locally based publishers. Much is still being published, but little worth singling out as yet for an international audience. An example of our new regionalism is *Six Poets of British Columbia* (Sono Nis Press), edited by Robin Skelton, whose introduction reveals some of the flaws of this approach: 'The poetry of British Columbia is as various as its landscape and as full of surprises.' At the other extreme of the critical spectrum, we have Nicole Brossard's challenging bilingual anthology of experimental writing from Quebec, *Les stratégies du réel/the story so far 6* (Coach House). She writes: 'This anthology symbolizes for me delight of

daring stemming from modes of writing which, in their beginning, appeared as refusal, as affirmation of an impossibility confronting the already authorized-accepted statement and discourse in the politico-cultural environment of Quebec in the seventies.'

*Contemporary Quebec Criticism*, translated by Larry Shouldice (University of Toronto), makes a useful companion anthology. Toronto has also published *The Arts in Canada: The Last Fifty Years*, ed. W.J. Keith and B.Z. Shek, with important essays by Northrop Frye, Hugh MacLennan, Robertson Davies and George Woodcock, among others. And at last there is a critical book on Atwood: Sherill Grace's *Violent Duality* (Véhicule).

The third volume in the Canada's Lost Plays series, *The Developing Mosaic: English-Canadian Drama to Mid-Century*, ed. Anton Wagner (Canadian Theatre Review Publications), is the most exciting yet, for it documents a history of experimentation, particularly in the expressionist plays of Herman Voaden, where we had thought none existed. David French's contemporary comedy, *Jitters*, is now available from Talon-books.

A disappointing announcement appears in this year's *Aurora: New Canadian Writing 1980* (Doubleday): with this volume they are suspending publication. Editor Morris Wolfe claims that the economics of publishing in Canada discourages new, quality writing. The result of the Ian Adams case — which established that a novelist could indeed be sued for libel — hardly brightens this picture. Nor does novelist Jack Hodgins' report on his recent visit to Japan, where he discovered the only Canadian fiction available in that country were Harlequin romances.

DIANA BRYDON

## INDIA

The publishing event of the year in terms of bibliography is Graham W. Shaw's *Printing in Calcutta to 1800* (OUP, London). Though it is naturally dominated by the work of British writers on India, it has several valuable leads for scholars interested in eighteenth century Indian writing in English. So far as creative writing by Indians is concerned, the publishing event is undoubtedly Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*



(Cape, London). A mixture of the imagined and the real, of history and fable, it is a mythic, poetic exploration of how India has been transformed in the twentieth century in certain basic respects and yet has, in other ways, either remained unchanged or adapted to a new milieu by modifying itself only in certain external, superficial ways. The vehicle of this exploration is a generation of children, all born with the Independence of India, who possess strange powers: one is a werewolf, another can walk through polished surfaces, and so on. This relates the book to an ancient Indian tradition of storytelling as well as to the modern interest in mythmaking: there is a congruence between the means and the end, though the book will not be to everyone's taste.

With a certain formal similarity and equally exploratory, if more problematic due to the absence of external landmarks, is Amitava Ray's *Baby Tiger* (Wild and Woolley, Sydney). Technically less interesting, but perhaps more popularly readable is Farrukh Dhundy's *Poona Company* (Gollancz, London). This evokes the teeming life of a Poona bazaar in a series of short stories, linked by the locale as well as by a common set of comic characters.

Other novels which should be noted include: Iqbal S. Bawa, *The Colley Slave* (Frank Brothers, Delhi), Gautam Sen, *Marbles at Midnight* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta), and E.P. Menon's *Seven Hours to Dawn* (Symphony, Bangalore).

Themes of feminine interest are provided by Chaman Nahai's *The English Queens* (Vision, New Delhi), S.D. Singh's novel on the role of Indian royalty during the 1857 'Mutiny', *The Rajah's Mistress* (Newman, New Delhi), Balwant Gargi's autobiographical novel *The Naked Triangle* (Vikas, New Delhi), Nergis Dalal's *The Girl from Overseas* (Hind, New Delhi), Uma Vasudev's *The Song of Anasuya* (Vikas), and Quaratullain Hyder's *A Woman's Life* (Chetana, New Delhi) which in fact includes two novelettes, one with the same title as the volume, and another on the 'Tea Gardens of Sylhet'.

By contrast, military themes were explored in a welcome reprint of Manohar Malgonkar's 1959 biography of the Maratha admiral *Kanhoji Angre* (*The Sea Hawk*, Vikas). The contemporary Vice-Admiral of the Indian navy, N. Krishnan, gives an account of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war in the Bay of Bengal, *No Way But Surrender* (Vikas), while Nirmal Nibedon locates his *Mizoram: The Dagger Brigade* (Lancers, New Delhi) in the politically troubled Indian hills sandwiched between Bangladesh and the Indian states of Manipur and Assam. Nibedon has broken a taboo in tackling the nature of the nationalist or regionalist (depending

on your point of view) guerilla movement called the Mizo National Front. Amita Kumar's *The Night of the Seven Dawns* (Vikas) is another war novel of interest.

Don Moraes gave up his Indian citizenship a couple of decades ago but, like Naipaul and Raja Rao, will probably find his name inextricably linked with the country to which he repeatedly returns in his writing as well as in his person. His biography of Mrs Gandhi (The Bodley Head, London) is lit by flashes of stylistic brilliance but fails to capture her elusive and enigmatic personality, and Moraes himself remains ambivalent in his response to her.

Mrs Gandhi's own *My Truth* (Vikas) is in a tradition of autobiographical and polemical writing in English by Indian public figures that goes back to the early nineteenth century, and its title evokes a comparison with Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*. If it is not in the same literary class as any of the earlier 'public' writings, *My Truth* does provide an insight into the workings of her mind and is a curiously valuable piece of literature: politicians sum up their own times and, however one may value the phenomena, the pre-Emergency slogan that 'Indira is India' has a germ of truth unintended by the flatterers who coined it.

Other autobiographical accounts by public figures include Kasthuri Sreenivasan's *Climbing the Coconut Tree* (OUP, Delhi) and H.D. Sethna's *The Mind's Journey* (Arnold-Heinemann, New Delhi). Some members of the Indian Foreign Service have written memoirs of their travels abroad; D.N. Chatterjee, Indian ambassador to Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) from 1962-64, has written an account of the civil war in Zaïre, *Storm over Congo* (Vikas). By contrast, few of the thousands of Indian teachers in Africa and other 'under-developed' countries of the world have written of their experiences. M.C. Gabriel, with an earlier reputation as a poet, who was in Ethiopia from 1966-71, has remedied that deficiency with his experiences there, *Thirteen Months of Sunshine* (Prachi Prakashan, New Delhi). P.S. Sharma's collection of Palestinian resistance poems, *Forever Palestine* (PLO (India) Office, New Delhi) is of greater political than poetical interest but does show another level of Indian literary interest in other countries.

Mohan Mukerji's *The Ham In the Sandwich* (Vikas) is a humorous account of life in the Indian Administrative Service, while Shanta Kumar, in his *A Chief Minister's Prison Diary* (Vikas), ruminates on political fortunes, the Emergency, and India's prison system, which has recently received such a bad press. The emergence of autobiography and

biography as increasingly popular literary genres is striking evidence of the change in India's philosophical orientation; different views were presented on this question in the papers for the eleventh annual conference of the Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, now published by them as *Historical Biography in Indian Literatures*, edited by S.P. Sen.

Further evidence of changing values is provided by Rājī Narasimhan's *Sensibility Under Stress: Aspects of Indo-Anglian Fiction* (Ashajanak, New Delhi), and by Meena Shiriwadkar's first-ever feminist critique of the Indian novel, *The Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel* (Sterling, New Delhi), which examines writing in regional languages as well. G.S. Amar's *Images and Impressions* (Panchsheel, Jaipur) includes a discussion of Kannada literature alongside Indian English writing. Most other critical volumes, such as M.K. Naik's *Aspects of Indian Writing in English* (Macmillan, Madras) were more traditional in approach. K.P.K. Menon's discussion of the work of A. S. P. Ayyar (Macmillan) is a welcome examination of the work of this stylist who has a high reputation in his own state of Kerala, but is little known outside it. The Kerala Sahitya Akademi (academy of letters) is to be commended for boldly becoming the first regional academy to promote study of writers in English from within its region; further volumes in the Kerala Writers in English series are awaited with anticipation.

D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu's *The Critical Response* (Macmillan) takes American, British, Commonwealth, and Indian Literatures for its province.

The annual *Review of National Literatures* (New York) has just released its special (1979) issue on India. Among Indian journals, *The Literary Criterion* (Mysore) continues to provide rich material, especially in the first two issues for Vol. 15, which have a selection of papers from the 1979 seminar, organised by the Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, on the theme 'Towards the Definition of a Modern Classic in Commonwealth Literature'; participants at the seminar came from several Asian countries, and Australia. *Enact* (New Delhi) approaches its fifteenth anniversary, having published, in English or in English translation, some 100 playscripts.

In his anthology *Indian English Prose* (Arnold Heinemann) D. Ramakrishna courageously introduces an underrated and underexplored area of Indian Writing in English, while K.N. Daruwalla's anthology *Two Decades of Indian Poetry* (Vikas) includes the work of seventeen Indo-English poets from 1960-80. There were, however, disappointingly few volumes of poetry: Jayanta Mahapatra, *Waiting* (Samkaleen, New

Delhi); Sitakant Mahapatra, *The Jester and Other Poems* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta) and his *Samudra* (Friends Publications, Cuttack) about the human situation in a metaphysical context; Agha Shahid Ali, *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (Writers Workshop); A.N. Rama, *Bird of Jesus* (Writers Workshop); A.P. Mukundan *The Great I and Other Poems* (Samkaleen); and Z. Zaidi *Images in a Broken Mirror* (Prayer Books, Calcutta).

In *Karma Cola* (Fontana) Gita Mehta's dazzling style contributes to Indo-English prose rather than to sociology, though its examination of how Western interest misconceives and trivialises Indian religion is often penetrating. Nirad Chaudhuri's *Hindulism* (OUP paperbacks), on the other hand, is as well written as it is substantial, though it has been attacked by Western scholars whose pet notions of Indian religions are threatened by Chaudhuri's personal and scholarly testimony. Finally, M.M. Desai has edited a collection of papers on *Creative Literature and Social Work Education* (Somaiya, Bombay) which includes discussions of Indo-English, Marathi and Gujarati literature; this testifies to the fact that Indian literature in English is now taken seriously, along with literature in India's regional languages, as a means of understanding the many faces of India.

PRABHU S. GUPTARA

## PAKISTAN

The sense of impending doom under which the English writer, or any other writer for that matter, has been tolling of late in this country is beginning to tell, in the writing and in the general culture. The presence of Russian troops just out where General Zia's Islamic Martial law ends, brought cheer to no one. The freedom to write, meagre as it always was, has been circumscribed further by an era of stringent press censorship, displacement of writers, disappearance or proscription of literary outlets, disparagement of decent works failing to qualify as 'Islamic', the discouragement — indeed, the virtual extirpation — of English, and the Cromwellian closing of cinemas and theatres round the country.

Writing in this climate is an act of freedom, of affirmation. The quantity is not impressive, yet there are signs and voices that are heard and seem to prevail: the books are few, but the belief is strong. We devise

survival even as the country's recidivist Martial Law, fourth since Independence, grinds its teeth at intellectual and imaginative defiance. The writer has almost begun to know his means.

Irony is one, allegory and parallelism another. Bapsi Sidhwa's first novel, *The Crow Eaters* (London, Cape) was a success. The story of a Parsi family, that moved to Lahore from elsewhere in India round the end of the last century, and its vicissitudes till 1940 is told with humour and gusto. The finesse of its language and the piled-up ironies of incident and character, of verbal wit and good-natured fun, remain enjoyable to the last. Only in years has a charming novel like this appeared in Pakistan, which, unlike some 'purist' experiments, is not politically innocent of its social environment. No doubt, within Pakistan it hasn't been received without demur, though the response has been more enthusiastic abroad.

No books of poetry last year, except G. Allana's *The Hills of Heaven: Selected Poems* (Karachi, Royal Books) which mostly contains poems already published in other places. Zulfikar Ghose and Alamgir Hashmi published a number of poems in the periodicals in North America and Europe. Hashmi has been publishing his poetry in Pakistan as well; he also published his translations of some poems by the Urdu poet Gilani Kamran, in *Pacific Quarterly* (NZ, April 1980). There were no readings whatsoever, except those privately arranged.

Muhammad Munir, formerly Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, brought out his collection of reminiscences, *High Ways and By-Ways of Life* (Lahore, Law Pubng. Co.) which will surely generate much interest, following the stir created by his previous year's *From Jinnah to Zia* (Lahore, Vanguard) which was mostly a politico-historical account of Pakistan's days and ways.

In historical criticism, the best book in the year was *Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and the Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (Columbia Univ. Pr.), by Hafeez Malik, dealing with the 19th-century writer and reformer. Other books of similar interest may be *Crisis in Muslim Education* (Hodder and Stoughton), by S.S. Husain and S.A. Ashraf, and *Iqbal, Jinnah, and Pakistan* (USA, Syracuse University), edited by C.M. Naim.

As the foregoing makes obvious, the debilitating compulsions of the new order in Pakistan have pushed most of the writers and writing — at least what they can publish and share — out of the country. Should the present situation persist for long, English stands a slim chance of surviving as a creative medium, though many will still embrace it as a func-

tional Esperanto. Again, whatever is being written now finds very little outlet as the publishing opportunities in the country are now almost nil. Publishers of Commonwealth writing in other places have not been able to ease the situation and thus they might be assisting in hastening the unnatural death of what could very well be the best period of Pakistani Literature in recent history.

No doubt, *Explorations*, the literary and research journal of English language and literature published at the Government College in Lahore, continues in its stand against the odds in an exemplary fashion and was out once in the year (instead of the usual two issues). While its contents are strong, proofreading seems to be a main problem. Some cultural and literary coverage is ventured by a few general publications, and the *Pakistan Times*, *Viewpoint*, and the *Muslim* have been devoting space to literary subjects. Indeed, some fine poems appeared during the year in the *Pakistan Times* and *Viewpoint*.

The merger of the previously separate governmental departments of Culture and Tourism under the Ministry of Army generally indicates the Establishment's touristic, showcase view of Culture, and English writing is just about the last thought in the mind of the neo-Islamic Republic. However, perhaps time will soon necessitate the restoration of common sense.

ALAMGIR HASHMI

## SINGAPORE

Perhaps the single most significant event of the year was the publication of *Singa*, Journal of Literature and the Arts in Singapore. *Singa*, taking its name from *Singa-pura* (original name of Singapore), is the official publication about literature and the arts in Singapore of the Ministry of Culture. As its first editorial puts it: '(*Singa*) features, in the main, original creative writing by Singaporeans, as well as reviews and surveys of the arts in general. Poems, short stories, short plays, excerpts from novels and full-length plays, reproductions of paintings are among what we would like to feature on an on-going basis.' Initially *Singa* is to be published twice a year and the first six issues receive handsome subsidy from Esso. *Singa* is edited by Arthur Yap, Sng Boh Khim and K. Singh. Because it intends to publish translations from Malay, Chinese and Tamil a team of six contributing editors (two from each language stream) are on the editorial board. The idea of *Singa* was first mooted

by Edwin Thumboo who is the Chairman of the Ministry's advisory committee on literary matters. The first issue of *Singa* has met with overwhelming success. Each copy costs US\$2/- and subscriptions and enquiries may be directed to Singa, Ministry of Culture, City Hall, Singapore. A review of the inaugural issue of *Singa* will be forthcoming in *Kunapipi*.

In its desire to foster literature among the Singapore public the Ministry of Culture organised a Poetry Recital. What was unique about this Recital was the fact that 1) it was officially sponsored and 2) for the first time poets from all the four official languages in Singapore (English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil) met and read their works to the public. Part of the Recital was broadcast over SBC Radio. We look forward to a greater interest on the part of the Ministry of Culture in literary matters and can reasonably expect more such Recitals in the future.

SBC Radio has been very active in making the public aware of matters relating to literature and the creative arts as well. Two programmes, both under the very able producer-ship of Charlotte Lim, may here be mentioned. *Arts Alive* deals with artists, writers and critics of the arts and enables a public discussion of problems and prospects. *The Book Scene* reviews books locally published as well as interviews writers as and when the opportunity arises. Both these slots are valuable and are increasingly paying more attention to literary matters in Singapore.

The big event for 1980, as far as books are concerned, was, of course, the Annual Book Fair. It was an especially significant event for a new step was taken by its organizer, the National Book Development Council: to invite well-known international writers to grace the Book Fair each year. The first such Guest-of-Honour was Brian Aldiss, noted British author and critic. For the Fair the NBDG also published the Festival of Books Issue of the *Singapore Book World*, a publication designed to bring to public awareness some of the latest books to be published in the Republic. *Singapore Book World* is handsomely printed and should form part of anyone's library.

Publishing activity was varied and active. Several writers brought out new books. Lee Tzu Pheng's *A Prospect of Drowning* (Heinemann) finally made its appearance. Lee is one of Singapore's finest poets and her well-known poem, 'My Country and My People' has now become a Singapore classic. Lee writes sensitively, sensibly. She is best when writing about private emotional states and situations, metaphor being a staple ingredient of her best poetry. *My Country and My People* is Lee's first

collection of poems (long overdue) and we anxiously await her next collection.

*Down the Line* (Heinemann) is Arthur Yap's third collection of poems. Yap has emerged as one of Singapore's best practitioners of the poetic craft with his ability to wield language to achieve desired effects. Yap is precise, economic, laconic. Behind the veneer of wit and humour is a wry tone which underlines the humanistic vision which he so urgently wants to communicate. Over the years Yap's poetry has got better and better linguistically but the cost has been a slowing down of emotional thrusts. There is no doubt, however, that Yap's poetry has added a new dimension to Singapore's poetry.

A lesser-known poet, Ong Teong Hean, brought out *Purple Leaves* (privately published). This is a most exquisitely published volume of verse and is fast becoming a collector's delight. Ong tends to be prosaic but in his best verse is able to convey his feelings and ideas crisply.

Simon Tay, a very young poet, also published privately his first collection of poems, *Prism*. Tay has potential and should develop into a fine poet if the sensibility he now possesses is kept alive. Many other poets continue to write and publish, thus contributing to the very active and lively poetry scene in Singapore. Poetry Corner, edited by K. Singh and published by *The Sunday Times* each week (circulation over 200,000) continued to flourish with an average of 50 poems pouring in each week from readers. This despite public ridicule of the column in Parliament: the Singapore public has demonstrated that it needs an outlet for its creative energies and talents. Politicians, in talking about 'realities' may do well to bear in mind that Poetry is also a 'reality'.

Robert Yeo's play *One Year Back Home*, concerning the difficulties surrounding Opposition in Singapore's One Party State, was successfully produced by Max le Blond. Yeo, a versatile writer, managed to capture succinctly some aspects of the socio-political environment of Singapore and le Blond did an excellent job in the actual production of this controversial play. We now await its publication. Yeo has edited the first volume of *Prize Winning Plays*, a series of books sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, to make available to the public creative writings that have won prizes in competitions organized by it. The first volume of *Prize Winning Plays* (Federal) contains a very useful Introduction by Yeo and three very different plays set in Singapore. Singapore, with its cosmopolitan structure and its fast-moving pace is a haven for dramatists (whose business it is, after all, to explore situations of conflict) and the three plays collected in this volume provide ample evidence of this. *The*



*Paper Lanterns* (Pan-Pacific), a play by John Tan (who has also written a novel, *Bird Without Wings*), was published but has not been produced on stage yet. It is a short play and deals with the problems attendant upon a society in which materialism is rife. Tan is able to portray well the situation, though the play tends to become overtly philosophical. But *The Paper Lanterns* is a welcome addition to Singapore's drama.

Catherine Lim, Singapore's best selling authoress, whose first book of short stories — *Little Ironies* — has now become a household word in literary circles, continued with more little ironies in her second collection, *Or Else the Lightning God & Other Stories* (Heinemann). As the note on the back-cover states, this book 'presents another succession of vignettes brilliantly observed and meticulously executed against the backdrop of the ever-changing Singapore scene. Once again with her touch of irony and pathos, the author provides fascinating insights into familiar and not so familiar aspects of life'. A very different kind of book came in the form of *Singapore Science Fiction*, edited by R. S. Bathal, Dudley de Souza and K. Singh. This book is unique in that it is the first ever anthology of science fiction stories to be published in Singapore. It contains thirteen short stories, each different and each a fascinating exploration of some scientific/technological theme. Singapore provides ample stimulus to those interested in science fiction and *Singapore Science Fiction* bears able testimony to this stimulus.

On the critical front, some interesting articles appear in *Commentary* Vol. IV, No 2 (Jan. 1980). 'Towards a Singapore Classic', an article by K. Singh exploring the problems and prospects of a 'classic' in Singapore appears in *The Literary Criterion* Vol. XV, No 2 (1980). Another critical article by K. Singh, 'Creative Expression in Cultural Diversity', dealing with the problems of being a writer in English in a multi-lingual context like Singapore, appears in the book *Arts in Cultural Diversity*, ed. Condaous, Howlett and Skull (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Sydney, 1980). Book reviews continue to appear in *The Straits Times* and other newspapers. The problem with the critical enterprise as a whole, in Singapore, seems to be that those who write criticism do not feel inclined to build upon other critical writings which are already there; each goes off on his or her own track without even bothering to find out if some of these tracks have already been covered. In view of all this K. Singh is now working on a full-length book which will bring together all the major critical writings on Singaporean/Malaysian Literature in English published in the last thirty years. This

project is the first-ever research project to be sponsored by the National Book Development Council. It is expected to be completed in June 1981.

Finally, a personal note: When I first began editing Poetry Corner for *The Sunday Times* in November 1979, I received a bundle of poems from an old man, a Malay man I had never heard of before. But I was impressed by the poems and I arranged to meet him. I discovered a frail but resilient man of 80 years who had been writing poems for over forty years. His one wish was to see his poems collected and published. I approached a publisher friend and at the end of last year, *The Marriage of the Rocks & Other Poems* (Chopmen) appeared. Mohammad Ibrahim, the poet, is a born singer of songs, and to read his poems (all ballads or variations of the form) is to enter once again the magic world of poetry written for all races of man and for all times. With the appearance of *The Marriage of the Rocks* the eventful literary year 1980 drew to a close.

KIRPAL SINGH

## SOUTH AFRICA

The 1970s saw a poetry revival in South Africa, which was given initial impetus by Oswald Mtshali's seminal collection of black township poetry, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971). In 1980 Mtshali's second collection, *Fireflames* (Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg) appeared; and a comparison of the earlier with the later collection (currently banned) gives an indication of the increasing radicalization of South African literature over the last decade. Mtshali's has shifted from a characteristically 'liberal' voice of protest to what Ezekiel Mphahlele recently described as a 'hard apocalyptic voice'; one no longer depicting the horrors of the Soweto streets, but prophesying a revolutionary future in a new Azania.

Yet, despite the publication of *Fireflames*, and of promising first collections by Shabbir Banooobhai (*echoes of my other self*, by Ravan Press, Johannesburg) and Esop Patel (*They Came at Dawn*, by Blac, Athlone), 1980 was not a particularly notable year for poetry. Rather, the emphasis was on fiction. William Plomer's famous novel, *Turbott Wolfe*, whose racial outspokenness first caused a stir in 1925, was re-issued by Donker, Johannesburg; while playwright Athol Fugard's only novel, *Tsetsi* (Donker), written some twenty years ago, was published for the first time. Edited by Stephen Gray, who also edited *Turbott Wolfe*,

*Tzotsi* is a vivid story of salvation and damnation played out against the stress of black urban life and gang warfare.

Stephen Gray continued to be one of the more energetic figures on the local literary scene. His own novel, *Caltrop's Desire* (David Philip, Cape Town), presents a powerfully satirical picture of individual crisis in a period of transition, from a colonial order to a modern apartheid state. In addition, Gray compiled a collection of short stories, *Modern South African Stories* (Donker), and edited C. Louis Leipoldt's hitherto unpublished novel of the Boer War, *Stormwreck* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town), which in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Leipoldt's death appeared alongside the re-issue of that Afrikaans/English writer's early work, *Bushveld Doctor*. Furthermore, in commemoration of the 75th anniversary of Herman Charles Bosman's birth, Gray compiled a *Selected Bosman* (Human & Rousseau) and successively adapted for the stage that short-story writer's harrowing account of prison life, *Cold Stone Jug*.

New work by other established writers included two autobiographies, Alan Paton's *Towards the Mountain* (David Philip) and Richard Rive's *Writing Black* (David Philip), as well as a collection of short stories by Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace* (Jonathan Cape, London). A first novel by Christopher Hope, entitled *Separate Development* (Ravan), proved to be too biting for the authorities and was banned, while *Forced Landing: contemporary black writings from africa south* (Ravan) was also banned, then unbanned. Much of the literary energy during 1980 did in fact emanate from black writers. Ahmed Easop's *The Visitation* (Ravan), Miriam Tlali's *Amandla* (Ravan) and Mbulelo Mzamane's collection of short stories, *Mzala* (Ravan), all capture aspects of a post-Soweto South Africa. Further perspectives are provided by Rose Zwi's *Another Year in Africa* (Bateleur Press, Johannesburg), a novel employing a Jewish-South African background, and by Wessel Ebersohn's *Store Up the Anger* (Ravan), banned because the protagonist too closely resembled the dead Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko! We'll ignore James Michener's *The Covenant* (Secker & Warburg, London) — South Africa for the wide screen. Hawaii has had to suffer Michener's particular brand of 'faction' and so now does South Africa.

Athol Fugard's new play, *A Lesson for Aloes* (due to be published by O.U.P.), is a social realist exploration of self-identity and constriction. This play ran successfully in Johannesburg before moving to New York where it struggled to survive against soaring theatre costs. 1980 saw the continuing emergence of a black 'theatre of the dispossessed', encour-

aged by Ravan Press's cheaply produced Playscripts Series, which includes the award-winning Zakes Mda's *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* and other plays, as well as Ronnie Govender's *The Lahnee's Pleasure* and Mtsamela Manaka's searing indictment of migrant labour conditions in *Egoli*.

An intense re-examination of traditionally held Eurocentric attitudes has over the last five years characterized South African literary debate in the streets, and such questioning is at last beginning to be heard in those edifices to The Great Tradition: the South African university English Departments. Most universities now offer courses on South African literature and Donker Publishers has begun a new series of critical studies aimed in the first instance at South Africans. *Perspectives on South African Fiction* by MacLennan, Hutchings and Christie, should provide students with a valuable standard critical work, while books in press include Chapman's *Douglas Livingstone — a critical study of his poetry*.

The Johannesburg-based *Staffrider* magazine has continued to promote the work of black writers groups throughout South Africa and Zimbabwe, thus providing a vital socio-literary barometer. A new bi-monthly magazine, *The Bloody Horse* (Bateleur, Johannesburg), hopes to do the same by extending its survey to include both white and black literary activity. Many believe that *The Bloody Horse* will only be able to attract white writers (such being the present literary polarizations in South Africa) and as a result will end up as a Sanguinary Equine — white writing (the more 'committed' commentators insist) being bankrupt and incapable of confronting present-day South African tensions. This in itself is a challenging proposition and it will be interesting to see whether *The Bloody Horse* succeeds, like *Staffrider*, in stamping its own personality on the South African literary scene of the eighties.

MICHAEL CHAPMAN

# Book Reviews

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B.R. Whiting, *Winter for Quiet* Viale di Trastevere 259 Press, Rome, 1979. 35 pages. Lir. 2,000.

To read B.R. Whiting's *Winter for Quiet* is to be rather scandalized that so fine a poet should be so little known. But the blame lies perhaps with Whiting's own wanderings which took him from his native Australia to India where he served in both the British army and the Bengali civil service, becoming Casey's, Mountbatten's, and briefly Gandhi's bodyguard, and then to Italy where he now divides his time between Rome and a Tuscan boating community. Boating appears to be his abiding love; and his latest collection is a series of poems about the sea as the small-boat sailor comes to love and fear it.

Whiting is fascinated both with the wildness of the sea and the precise technology that seeks to oppose it:

For an object whose height is known in advance  
Take a Sextant angle, measuring.  
Enter the Table and read off the distance —  
But in the mist we went by reckoning.

I knew the rotten tooth, half eaten away,  
The tower called Le Prétre and the mile of reef  
known as les Moines, and sailing confidently  
Set a course to pass between rock and cliff;

In cold grey air the gilly swell was clear  
And suddenly boiled a swirl, right by the lee,  
Where a granite hand reached near —  
We were off, only by the sound of the sea —

Dead reckoning and in error...

(from 'Les Moines')

Elsewhere he describes how 'in the telescope of the sextant'

The sun becomes a bottle-green globe, sliding  
About in one man's hand that cannot control  
The horizon riding up and down and reading  
Whatever he makes of it, and never still ...

... But when we put the nautical Tables down  
The ancient Gods come out of the prerite —  
Aphrodite rises above the dawn,  
And Mars, one red small eye on the satellites.

(from 'In the Telescope of the Sextant')

Whiting's work shows equal respect for the crafts of sailor and poet (note those unobtrusive rhymes and half-rhymes). If he is to be classed among the Australians, the poet he most resembles is John Blight, not simply in his fascination with the sea but in such conceits as that of the superannuated boat loaded onto its trailer — 'The wreck calling the sailor where he must go/ Inland at last'.

In general, however, Whiting's analogies between the human and the natural world are controlled by more technical knowledge than Blight's. In this respect he can be associated with the important tradition (common to such very different Australian poets as A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, and Les Murray) of using modern evolutionary myth and biological knowledge as a way to make poetic sense of new regions.

Life is the alme at the meeting of land and sea;  
Ancient sea-coasts long dry are betrayed  
By the fossil line of the blue-green algae.  
At the same rate as winter, rain, and flood,  
Periwinkles wear away the rocks, slow filing.  
Teth on a ribbon the substance of insects' wings.  
Persistent, proof against gales, a low profile;  
The headland-breaking roller flings  
Against the mussel beds a million tons  
Green, dead weight and the wild another  
Where the immense backwash foams down —  
They offer only silken threads for anchor —

(from 'A Low Profile')

MARK O'CONNOR

## Journals

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### THE LITERARY CRITERION

Volume 15, Nos 3 and 4, is a special double issue on Australian Literature. It includes articles by A.D. Hope, Geoffrey Blainey, Vincent Buckley, Leonie Kramer, Chris

Wallace-Crabbe, Bob Brinsden, Frank Moorhouse, Brian Matthews, S.C. Harrex, Andrew Taylor, Barry Andrews, Dorothy Green, John Docker, Veronica Brady, Mark Macleod, Margaret Williamson, Ian Reid, and Alexander Craig. Copies are available from The Editor, *The Literary Criterion*, Divanyaloka, Mysore - 570 006, India. Rs.15.

## ARIEL

There will be a special issue of *Ariel* on African literature which will be published in Summer 1981. The issue will deal with as many aspects of African literature in English as possible: with poetry, drama and criticism as well as fiction. It will also include a long review article on recent critical studies of the African novel as well as shorter notices. The scholarly and critical studies will be complemented with a selection of contemporary African poetry. *Ariel* is edited by Ian Adam, Department of English, The University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

## THE COMMONWEALTH NOVEL IN ENGLISH

The editor of *Commonwealth Novel in English*, a biannual to appear in January and July, and which is to appear initially in January 1982, invites formal, sociological, and psycho-analytical criticism, checklists and bibliographies, book reviews etc. on the works of Commonwealth novelists; interviews are also solicited.

Contributors should send TWO copies of their manuscripts, the format of which should adhere to the *MLA Style Sheet* (Second Edition). All correspondence should be addressed to Sudhakar R. Jankhandl, Editor, Department of English, University of Texas, Arlington, Texas, 76019, USA.

Annual subscription rates are as follows: — Students: \$4.00; Faculty: \$6.00; Institutions: \$8.00. Please add a postage fee of \$2.00 to all subscription fees. Magazines agencies may send to the Editor for bulk rates.

## ACLALS BULLETIN

Members should soon receive the final issue from Queensland. The Bulletin then moves to Canada. Cecil Abraham has asked me to inform readers that articles and reviews of books dealing with the national literatures in the Commonwealth will be gladly accepted. These items should be forwarded to Cecil Abraham, Editor, Department of English, Bishop's University, Lennoxville, Quebec, Canada J1M 1Z7.

## KOMPARATISTISCHE HEFTE

The Departments of English, French, and Comparative Literature at Bayreuth University, West Germany, have launched a bi-annual journal of General and Comparative Literature: *KOMPARATISTISCHE HEFTE*.

Two issues have appeared. No 1 (1980) *Literary Relations between Europe and Africa*, No 2 (1980) *Forms and Functions of National Stereotypes in Literature*.

Future issues include: No 3 (1981) Travelogues, No 4 (1981) Literary Translations, No 5 (1982) Mutual Influence of the Arts on One Another, No 6 (1982) Marginal Literatures, No 7 (1983) Literary Relations between Germany and France, No 8 (1983) Literary Relations between Europe and the Caribbean.

The editor invites scholarly contributions. Manuscripts may be submitted in English, French or German and should be double-spaced, with footnotes gathered at the end. Long quotations should be indented. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a summary (10-15 lines) in the two other languages. Correspondence, manuscripts and books for review should be sent to:

Prof. János Riesz  
Department of French and Comparative Literature  
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P.O. Box 5008  
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To subscribe to KOMPARATISTISCHE HEFTE (DM16,- annually) please write to:

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W. Germany

## In the Next Issue:

Nadine Gordimer on *Burger's Daughter*; interviews with Buchi Emecheta, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Derek Walcott; an Index to Katherine Mansfield References 1970-80; articles on V.S. Naipaul, Randolph Stow, modern South African poetry; autobiography Buchi Emecheta; graphics Ian Grainger.



# Conferences

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## Commonwealth Studies in West Germany: A Report on the Conferences in Oberjoch (26-29 June 1980) and Kiel (21-22 November 1980).

When the Frankfurt BookFair 1980 opened its gates in October, the attention of the German reading public was drawn to the literatures of Black Africa written in English, which were part of the central theme of this bookfair. Prior to that, the well attended Caribbean Week in Bremen (24-29 June 1980) had already opened the door to the anglophone literature of the West Indies. Both events, however, cannot conceal the fact that even the scholarly treatment of the literatures of the former British colonies is still in its infancy in West Germany, although one can notice a steady increase in the number of university courses and projects devoted to this particular area of English philology. This new tendency was strongly confirmed by the 4th 'Symposium on Commonwealth Literature in West Germany' (Oberjoch) and the symposium 'English Literature of the Dominions: Literature and the History of Settlement' (Kiel).

While the conference in Oberjoch was concerned with the development of the English language drama outside England and North America (i.e. Australia, Africa, India and the West Indies), the symposium at Kiel dealt with the history of settlement in the British Dominions, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand and its reflection in the anglophone national literatures of these countries.

The vast number of topics covered in Oberjoch ranged from the historical development of the Australian drama to the influence of Reggae on the drama in the Caribbean. Werner Arens (Regensburg) opened the conference with a survey on the history of the Australian drama. He especially emphasized the changing image of the stereotype Australian outback in the dramatic works of the past 25 years, indicating a revision of Australia's national myth that goes beyond merely theatrical interest. These observations were followed by Ortrun Zuber's (Crimfield University) analysis of the surprisingly negative depiction of Australian society in Australian drama. Zuber argued that this should be seen as the result of a particular didactic intention. Apparently, most Australian playwrights aim at forming a critical awareness of their public towards the social reality in Australia. The socio-political dimension of Australian drama was touched again when Bernard Hickey (Venice) talked about the 'Eureka Stockade' (1854). Hickey pointed out how this, the only militant rebellion (duration: 50 minutes) in the entire history of Australia, has not only become an important subject matter for Australian dramatists, but also a meaningful linguistic term in everyday life. Concluding the Australian section, Nelson Wattie (Cologne) presented a formalistic approach to the plays of Patrick White, whose literary fame is primarily based on his reputation as a novelist. In consequence, Wattie's interest was focused on the influence of the narrative techniques of the novelist, White, on the playwright, White.

In contrast to the papers on Australia, the contributions to African Commonwealth Literature were commonly determined by a concern for the political implications of the

works analysed. At first, Dieter Riemenschneider (Frankfurt) gave an introduction to the history and development of the anglophone drama in West Africa which also formed the basis for his comparative study of Rotimi's *Kurunwa* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Afterwards, Wolfgang Kloos (Kiel) presented a paper on the reception of Shakespeare in Africa. Apart from some informative remarks about the didactic function and the 'Africanisation' of Shakespeare's plays, Kloos compared Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, which is one of those Shakespeare adaptations that convey an anti-imperialist message. The reports on the English language drama of West Africa were then supplemented by Peter Stummer's (Munich) interpretation of Buchi Emecheta's documentary novel *Second-Class Citizen*. Stummer showed how Emecheta, a Nigerian expatriate in London, has transferred her own experience of a double discrimination (i.e. as a woman and as a black) into literary form.

Following the structural pattern so far typical for the conference, Gerhard Stihl (Tübingen) introduced the Indian and West Indian part of the programme with an historical survey of the anglophone Indian drama that paid particular attention to the classical traditions as well as to the commercial theatre in India. In a second paper Meena Chagas-Pereira (Reutlingen) dealt with Asif Corrimbhoy's play *Goa*. Her detailed analysis primarily revealed Corrimbhoy's fascination for allegory and melodrama. The only report on the Caribbean drama was given by Gordon Collier (Gießen) who not only presented an intrinsic study of Derek Walcott's *O Babylon!*, but was, moreover, interested in the political and social meaning of 'Rastafarianism' and the influence of Reggae on Walcott's dramatic work.

Similar to the conference in Oberjoch where the international character of Commonwealth Studies had become very evident, the Kiel Symposium was attended by a considerable number of participants from abroad. In this context one has to mention the writers Yvonne du Preme (New Zealand), Henry Belssel (Canada), and Rodney Hall (Australia) who introduced selections from their literary works to the audience and thus helped to prevent the conference from lapsing into purely 'academic small talk'.

At first, however, Colm Kiernan (Dublin) presented his ideas on 'Waltzing Matilda', Australia's unofficial national anthem. He understood this highly popular song, which goes back to the Irish ballad of 'Bold Jack Donohoe', as a musical realization of the concept of the alienated hero. Kiernan provoked sceptical reactions when he established a connection between 'Bold Jack Donohoe' and the development of an Australian national consciousness in the 19th century. The focus was then shifted to Eleanor Dark's documentary novel *Timeless Land*. Gordon Collier tried to defend Dark's novel against the attacks of the critic H.M. Green who regards *Timeless Land* as a well perceived historical account of the Australian past, but which is, at the same time, void of any aesthetic qualities.

In the next paper Jørn Carlsen (Aarhus) discussed the Canadian aspect of the history of settlement and its reflection in the novels of the Danish-Norwegian writer Aksel Sandemose. On the basis of a biographical approach, Carlsen analysed Sandemose's immigrant trilogy (unfortunately not yet available in an English translation) which he placed in the tradition of Canadian prairie realism. Considering an historical as well as an ideological point of view, Rourad Gross (Kiel) talked about the image of Franco-Canada in the early Anglo-Canadian novel. Gross showed how the English Canadian novel has mirrored a development that began with the total rejection of *La Nouvelle France* and ended in the recognition of Old Quebec as a reliable source for the search of a Canadian identity.

At the beginning of the New Zealand part of the programme Anna Rutherford (Aarhus) commented on Yvonne du Fresnoe's autobiographical short story collection, *Færvel*. Du Fresnoe's Danish-Huguenot descent led Rutherford to viewing *Færvel* against the background of the minority literatures of Australia and New Zealand. Although she was critical of the nostalgic past in du Fresnoe's writings, this did not, on the other hand, restrain her from an appraisal of the quality of the short stories as social documents. One of du Fresnoe's forerunners was Lady Barker whose experiences on a sheep station in the New Zealand Alps found their literary expression in two novels entitled *Station Life in New Zealand* and *Station Amusements in New Zealand*. In the last paper of this symposium Nelson Wattie gave an impressive account of Barker's novels which do not only propagate the English upper-class consciousness of the author, but also reveal a solely materialistic outlook on nature. Nature does not bear any romantic features. It is totally reduced to its function within the realm of colonisation.

With regard to the extensive number of topics covered at both conferences (shortly to be accessible in two essay collections) and the enthusiastic response of the numerous participants in Oberjoch and Kiel, one can only conclude that both symposiums marked an important step towards a more solid establishment of Commonwealth Studies in West Germany.

WOLFGANG KLOOS

### 'Images de l'Afrique en Occident', Paris, 20-22 November 1980.

Paris III and Paris XII combined to hold a conference to honour the visit of President Senghor to Paris. The theme of the conference was 'Images of West Africa: the Press, Mass Media and Literature'. The conference took place from 20 to 22 November 1980 and was organized by Michel Fabre and Robert Mase. Below is a list of papers given in the English section which was organized by Paris III:

Susan Willis (Yale Univ.): *Caliban as Poet, Reversing the Maps of Domination*. Etienne Galle (Univ. of Miami): *The European and African Critical Reception of Wole Soyinka*. Jürgen Martini (Univ. of Bremen): *Linking Africa and the West — Buchi Emecheta*. Alastair Niven (Director, Africa Centre, London): *Africa in the Contemporary British Cultural Scene*. Pierre Denain (Lille III): *Booker T. Washington and Liberia*. Kirsten Holst Petersen (Aarhus Univ.): *The Image of Africa and its Role in Garvey's and DuBois's Definition of Race*. Stefania Piccinato (Perugia): *African Myth and History in the Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*. Liliane Blary (Lille III): *Claude McKay and Africa in *Banjo**. Steven Rabin (Univ. of South Florida): *Ralph Ellison and the West African Literary Tradition*. Bernard Bell (Univ. of Massachusetts): *Images of Africa in the contemporary Afro-American novel*. Francoise Pfaff (Howard): *Hollywood's Image of Africa*.

These papers will be published. For further information contact Michel Fabre, Paris III.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

## First Spanish Seminar on Commonwealth Literature, 3-5 March 1981.

The study of Commonwealth literature in Spain is relatively recent. In fact, the course which I introduced for final year students in 1979 was the first of its kind.

Yet the time seemed to me to be ripe for a conference on Commonwealth Literature to be held in Spain. There were pockets of interest all over the country. Among the general public there seemed to be a growing awareness of this other area of English literature. Dr Doireann MacDermot had begun, in 1978, to create an interest in Australian literature among large numbers of students at the Central University of Barcelona.

The initial proposal for a seminar received the wholehearted support of the staff of the Modern Languages Department of the Autonomous University, though doubts were expressed. Who would lecture? Who would come to listen? Who would provide funds?

The first question was answered in the most heartening way. A nucleus of lecturers existed here in Barcelona. From the University of Granada Dr Villar Raso expressed his interest in delivering a paper on Canadian Literature. The British Council agreed to fund a lecturer from a university in Britain, and Professor William Walsh accepted the invitation. In addition I sent a circular letter to some 50 people in various European universities — EACLALS members, and those whose names were published in *Notes and Purports* list of teachers of Commonwealth Literature. Seventeen of those contacted submitted titles of papers they proposed to present. To me, this was the most exciting element of the total experience and bears witness, not just to the extent of interest in Commonwealth Literature, but to the willingness of those involved in the field to give support and encouragement to others. The more so in view of the fact that most of those who came had to fund themselves.

The decision to limit the scope of the seminar was based on certain harsh realities: severe lack of money; the absence of any kind of infrastructure, including secretarial service; the fact that the university is 27 kilometres from the city; that the majority of students have afternoon jobs, and this traditionally is an annual seminar designed primarily for students.

The final programme was based on a desire to include all the main geographic areas of the Commonwealth. The first morning was devoted to Australia, with Christine Pagnouille (Liège) talking on 'Time and Atonement in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*', Bruce Charles-Ross (Copenhagen) outlining 'Recent Developments in Australian Short Fiction', and Anna Rutherford (Aarhus) compensating for the neglect of Thes Aulley. In the evening the location shifted to the British Institute, where Professor William Walsh gave a lecture on 'Katherine Mansfield and the Rejected Country'.

Catalan socio-linguist Pilar Casanada outlined 'The Role of English in India' on the second morning. This was followed by Kirsten Holst Petersen's comparison of Achebe's *A Man of the People* with Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and an enthusiastic introduction to Isak Dinesen by Aranza Usandizaga (Central University). Professor Walsh lectured on Achebe at the Central University.

In the evening John Thimne (North London) gave an illustrated lecture on 'Calypso Allusions in Naipaul's *Miguel Street*'.

The final day opened with an introduction to Indian Literature in English given by Professor Walsh. This was followed by Professor Villar Raso speaking on Canadian Literature, and my own brief analysis of black literature from Papua New Guinea. The

concluding paper was presented in the British Institute by Doireann MacDermott, and bore the title 'The Aborigine in Australian Literature'.

Thanks for the success of the seminar go to all those who participated, and all who supported in various ways. Special mention should be made of Michel Fabre (Paris) who attended both to participate and to support. Thanks go, too, to the New Zealand Embassy, Paris, which provided two excellent feature films, a photographic exhibition, and a selection of books. The other embassies were singularly lacking in interest, although the Canadian Embassy has since compensated by donating some 50 books to the library.

The seed has now been sown in Spain. I am confident that we will now see an expansion of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in this country.

CARROLL SIMONS

### EACLALS Conference at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, 23-27 March 1981. Universals in particular

The topic of the conference was 'History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature'. Although this topic gives a wide scope for discussion about the relationship between history and literature the main subject became the relationship between the universal and the particular and, in this case, between the cosmopolitan centre and the Commonwealth periphery, to borrow a deliberately provocative term. The subject is inexhaustible and offers a welcome opportunity to vent colonial anger against the great tradition. Helen Tiffin set the tone by refusing to accept universals and declaring that they were just a British hoax to minimize the achievements of culture-specific art, which they didn't understand because they didn't know the background to it. This was a sentiment which was shared by other Australian participants. Both Bruce Bennett and Brian Mathews discussed the interaction between specifically Australian and universal (British) criteria for criticism. The Indian contingent, which was particularly well represented at this conference, carried on this theme, but shifted the tone slightly. Instead of talking about the pretentiousness of the English C.N. Devi spoke about the wind and the roots, and D.D. Baskiyar vindicated the Indianness of Raja Rao's novels. The Caribbean, African and South African sessions concentrated more on history than historiography, and this shift produced papers of a slightly different nature, like Victor Ramraj's paper about Nalpani's approach to history in *The Loss of Eldorado*, Ian Glenn's paper on the Kenyan elite and Stephen Watson's analysis of Liberalism in South Africa. The theme of specific Africanness was not completely neglected and occurred in connection with oral literature in the papers given by Richard Taylor and Taban Lo Liyong. Finally, Cecil Abrahams urged everybody to work actively for the overthrow of the white racist regime in South Africa.

One of the papers which created most interest was not so much on literature but on film. This was Susan Gardner's paper on Bruce Beresford's film *Breaker Morant* which is published in this issue of KUNAPIPI.

The full attendance at each session was a tribute to the high quality of the papers offered.

Dieter Riemenschneider should be congratulated on organising a very successful conference.

## New Zealand Film Festival in Dijon.

Between 16 and 20 March, with the help of the New Zealand Embassy and Film Commission, the department of English in Dijon organized a New Zealand Film Festival. The subject was of special interest to the students since most of the productions of this young industry have centred on novels or plays by NZ writers. Before moving on to fictional subjects, directors have started with documentaries on life in their region of the world. Our audience particularly appreciated *Children of the Mist* based on a Maori community of the Urewera. Three years ago, the evolution took a radical turn with *A State of Siege* by Vincent Ward which won the gold medal at the 1978 Miami Film Festival and the Golden Hugo at Chicago. Based on the novel by Janet Frame, the plot centres on a study of loneliness and fear in the face of a long-desired and yet anguishing freedom. Obviously inspired by Ingmar Bergman for his choice of colours and his love of chiaroscuro, Ward excels at bringing out the power of speechlessness and the dense symbolic evocations contained in a single visual detail or a sound.

Sam Pillsbury's *Against the Light* (1980) dramatizes Witi Ihimaera's story 'The Truth of the Matter'. The plot gives a different version of an incident narrated by four different characters. Written fiction can easily select and reconstruct in a way which leaves a lot of room for the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps. With a picture projected on a screen, the viewer's eyes are left with less freedom to interpret the event. Thus Pillsbury's task was almost an impossible challenge. In spite of much esthetic research (which sometimes appears to be done as a pure exercise in virtuosity) the result is not wholly satisfactory. The urban conflict which involves three men and a woman, Maoris and Pakehas tends to appear as four different stories rather than the subjective expression of several points of view.

*The Old Man's Story* (1978) matches Frank Sargison's story for its power of suggesting very deep human needs conflicting with the basic rules of a society. The love between the old man and the young girl could have become sentimental melodrama but, thanks to an art of the understatement, the director achieves on the screen what Sargison had so marvellously written on paper.

*The God Boy* takes up the same point of view of a child who discovers the cruelty of life and feels rather than expresses surprise and anger. Based on Ian Cross's famous novel, the film describes very convincingly the plight of a young Roman Catholic boy whose family is falling to pieces.

David Sims' *Jack Weather's Dream* was the only slightly disappointing part of the festival. Following Baxter's 'Play for Voices' fairly closely, it fails to translate the poetic language into convincing images. The result is a rather drawn-out production.

Paul Maunder's *Sons for the Return Home* (1979), though a little long in places, marvellously translates A. Wendt's first novel focused on the meeting of the Samoan and the Palagi (European) worlds. Filmed both in New Zealand and Samoa, the action even manages to avoid some of the excesses contained in Wendt's first work without losing any of the vigour or anger which are the stamp of Polynesian's prominent writer.

But the apotheosis of the festival was no doubt the projection of Vincent Ward's *In Spring One Plant is Alone* (1989). Pursuing the quest started with his previous film, the twenty-five-year-old director has produced a documentary which goes beyond realism and reaches the level of pure symbols. The elderly maori lady who lives alone with her handicapped adult son seems to embody all the suffering and all the love in the world. The extreme tension and silence are only punctuated by obsessional rituals and mumbling. The voyeuristic eye of the camera forces the audience to share in the limitations and strange beauty of this restricted environment. Images are present and speak, almost beyond language. They soar up and glide, like the heron whose flight opens and closes the story. In years to come, Vincent Ward should prove to be a leading figure in the development of New Zealand's young but extremely creative film industry.

## FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES

The second 'Commonwealth in Canada' Conference is scheduled for 1-4 October 1981 at the University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba. The theme of the conference is: 'The Use of Language in Commonwealth Literature'.

Papers may explore how writers use dialects, indigenous diction, rhetorical techniques, structural elements and other literary characteristics which result from the linguistic factors of the culture represented. Some flexibility will be allowed for papers which interpret the theme more widely.

Abstracts of papers for the conference should be no longer than 500 words. Abstracts and enquiries concerning the conference should be forwarded to:

CACILALE  
Department of English  
University of Winnipeg  
515 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3B 2E9

## UNIVERSITY OF DIJON

During the fourth week of November 1981 we are organizing a conference on Caribbean Literature in English. As this should coincide with the publication of *The Secret Ladder* in French translation, we have invited Wilson Harris. It is hoped that one or two other writers from the area will take part in the proceedings. We would like a number of papers to be focussed on the work of Wilson Harris, but, of course, contributions on other Caribbean authors are most welcome. Could you please let us know before 15 June whether you will attend this conference, give a paper and on what subject.

Jean-Pierre Durix

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G.D. Killam, Editor

WLWE is a journal devoted to criticism and discussion of Commonwealth literature, Third World writing in English and New World literature in English. Contributions of a scholarly critical nature are welcome on these and related subjects; contributions are also solicited specifically for a special issue on Canada in the Commonwealth. Other special features in future issues will include a section on Doris Lessing (1981) and one on English writing in Singapore and Malaysia (1982).

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## Africa Index to continental periodical literature

Edited by Colin Darch & O.C. Mascarenhas

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## The Journal of Commonwealth Literature

Edited by Andrew Gurr and Alastair Niven

Hans Zell Publishers have taken over publication of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, commencing with volume XIV, and it is now published twice annually in August and December each year. The first number of each volume contains all or some of several guides and covers the second is the Bibliography issue, providing an annual checklist of publications in each region of the Commonwealth.

Volume 14, no. 1, 1978—ISSN 0022-0094. Published twice annually, 217 x 260 mm. Subscription price: £8.00/US\$18.00 annually (surface postage included).

## Positive Review. A review of society and culture in Black Africa

Edited by Bodo Jeyile, Yemi Ogundiji, Kole Omoson, et al

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